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Abstract:

Recent scholarship has shown that women contributed to almost every aspect of the early modern economy. This article suggests society's reliance upon women's essential work may have given them greater political agency than hitherto appreciated. It focuses on the Westminster Soap Company under Charles I, a notorious monopoly that disrupted the laundry trade needed for keeping linens clean. Washerwomen possessed tacit knowledge about soap quality. So their judgement could undermine the reputation both of the monopoly product and of those involved. By combining state papers, parish records and legal testimonies often studied separately, the article then identifies Elizabeth Tucker living in one of the poorest London parishes who petitioned against the monopoly soap. Women like Tucker indeed confronted a London mayor, sparking widespread rumours about the king's displeasure at his alleged cowardice. Women's refusal to work with the inferior soap contributed to the company's collapse, rejection that was soon co-opted into the emerging critique of monopolies. The case thus questions the assumption that ordinary women's political participation was largely local and non-ideological. Yet their remarkable contributions remained invisible in the rights-based discourse that emerged. The article ends by considering how to reappraise women's political agency without discounting their invisibility.

JEL codes: N33, N43, N63, N83, N93, P14
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Recovering women's experience in the past has been a foundational task for the writing of gender history, and for achieving justice and equity generally.[1] The magnitude of the challenge can be overwhelming. Consider the 'rights of man'. As the feminist legal scholar Jennifer Nedelsky has acknowledged, 'The liberal tradition has had hundreds of

[1] Inspirational works include Rebecca Solnit, *Recollections of My Nonexistence* (London, 2020); Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 2021); Shon Faye, *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice* (London, 2021).

years to refine its framework', using the propertied man as a model to think about individual rights and liberties. Joan Scott once made a related point:

> The abstract rights-bearing individual who came into being as the focus of liberal political debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries *somehow* became embodied in male form and it is his-story that historians have largely told.[2]

It was clear to Scott and Nedelsky that liberal political discourses have revolved for centuries around men. Yet it does seem unclear why such debates came to be embodied in the figure of the man as it did. Was it because women were not involved? Or did political discussions focus on men's rights and liberties *despite women's contributions*? Recent scholarship on the pre-industrial European economy has questioned the utility of the 'male bread-winner' model, and reappraised women's work as 'engines of economic change'.[3] Should we also consider whether ordinary women's work gave them some leverage to act as engines of political change?

The goal of this article is to present a case study that can offer a fresh vantage point for exploring these pressing questions. To do so, I look into early modern England on the eve of the civil wars in the mid seventeenth century, a crucial moment in the history of right-based liberal political thought. Within this larger frame, my specific focus may strike as unexpected: washerwomen doing laundry in some of the poorest parishes in London during the early 1630s.

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[2] Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford, 2011), p. 6; Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (revised ed. New York, 1999), p. 25 (my italics).

[3] Jan Luiten van Zanden et. al., *Capital Women: The European Marriage Pattern, Female Empowerment and Economic Development in Western Europe 1300-1800* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 1-2; Jane Whittle, 'A Critique of Approaches to "Domestic Work": Women, Work and The Pre-industrial Economy', *Past & Present*, 243 (2019), 35-70; Catriona Macleod et. al. (eds.), *The Whole Economy: Work and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2023).

Why washerwomen? Their livelihood demands our attention because clean linen held a special place in early modern society. John Taylor the water poet put it well in his 'The Praise of Cleane Linnen' (1624): 'Cleane Linnen' was 'Our Corps first Cover, at our naked birth / And our last garment when we turne to Earth'.[4] Hard soap was generally of higher quality, expensive, and mostly imported. Accordingly, the so-called soft soap was the key item for keeping clean cloths, sheets, and other types of linen.[5] The expectation of keeping them 'sweet and wholesome' was so widespread and powerful that linen's whiteness was frequently linked with spiritual purity, and dirt and filth with vice and corruption.[6] The key ingredient for achieving that whiteness was the soft soap, and laundry was dominated mostly by women.

Under Charles I, however, the production of this vital commodity was placed under a royal monopoly by the Westminster Soap Company promoted by courtiers including Richard Weston. Established with a patent in 1632, the company's declared goal was to raise revenues for the Crown by improving the so-called balance of trade with foreign countries, namely by cutting reliance upon imported raw materials. The company did this by producing the so-called 'new soap', made exclusively of domestic, non-imported, oil and potash (namely, an alkaline solution made of burnt wood and water). Financially, this was an attractive proposition. The Anglo-Spanish War from 1625 put serious pressure upon royal finance, but from 1629, the king governed without summoning a parliament –

[4] John Taylor, *The Praise, of cleane linnen* (1624), [sig. A8].
[5] Susan North, *Sweet and Clean? Bodies and Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 215-7. Soft soap predominated laundry till the mid eighteenth century. Louise Falcini, 'Cleanliness and the Poor in Eighteenth-century London (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Reading, 2018), p. 121.
[6] Keith Thomas, 'Cleanliness and godliness in early modern England', in Anthony Fletcher and Peter Roberts (eds.), *Religion, Culture and Society in Early Modern Britain: Essays in Honour of Patrick Collinson* (Cambridge, 1994), 56-83; Natasha Korda and Eleanor Lowe, '"In Praise of Clean Linen": Laundering Humours on the Early Modern Stage', in David Gaimster, Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe*, (New York, 2016), 307-321.

the so-called Personal Rule of Charles I. Charles now had to raise money without relying on tax revenues approved by parliament. The company promoters promised to produce 5,000 tons of soap and raise the yearly sum of £20,000 to the Crown, more than 3% of the annual revenue.[7] This was not an exceptionally high expectation; a manuscript list of royal finance improvement schemes written in about 1626 projected an annual profit of £25,000 from the soap industry, the highest among the schemes related to domestic industries like forestry and fen drainage.[8] Little wonder that Charles I's chief advisor William Laud later called it 'this business ... of great consequence'.[9]

The project proved socially and politically controversial, however. Made from hays and tree branches, domestic potash contained higher alkalinity, so the new soap damaged washerwomen's hands as discussed below. Though rarely explored in depth, these women responded vigorously to the emerging monopoly, often in association with soap makers whose trade the monopoly also threatened. The 1632 patent enabled the company to appoint four searchers and their deputies empowered to test all soaps made and sold in England and Wales. It also enabled the company to seize any soap or potash sold without being tested and approved by its searchers first. Then the proclamation of June 1632 prescribed the use of domestic plant-based oils, in effect prohibiting the traditional method of making soft soap with imported whale oil.[10] By these two grants, the production of the existing soft soaps, now bundled as the 'old soap', became illegal, giving the company a *de facto* monopoly over soap production and control over its sales. In

[7] TNA, T 56/2, fol. 5v; William Robert Scott, *The Constitution and Finance of English, Scottish and Irish Joint-Stock Companies to 1720* (3 vols, Cambridge, 1910-12), vol. 1, pp. 206, 212; John Rushworth, *Historical collections the second part* [1629-1640] (1680), p. 143.
[8] SP 16/44, fol. 1v. For earlier attempts to produce soap using domestic raw materials, see TNA SP 14/176, fol. 76 (1624); SP 16/531, fol. 159 (1630).
[9] *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God, William Laud, Volume 3, Devotions, Diary, and History* (1853), p. 224 (12 July 1635).
[10] James F. Larkin (ed.), *Stuart Royal Proclamations* (2 vols., Oxford, 1983), vol. 2, pp. 355-9 (at p. 358). See also TNA, SP 16/204, fols. 180-[180v]; SP 16/210, fol. 117.

November, a legal case was launched in Star Chamber against Thomas Overman and fifteen other major soap-boilers in London, accusing them of producing the prohibited old soap. Hefty fines between £500 and £1500 were imposed upon them, and two of them later died under arrest.[11] In the meantime, civil authorities were ordered to help arrest defaulters and force them to enter bonds to promise future compliance.[12] Two more proclamations issued in 1634 and 1635 gave the company the power to enter suspected houses, seize goods belonging to defaulters and sell them in order to compensate for the cost of enforcement. Now the production of soap was banned even for private use.[13] The company was actively buying up domestic potash for its soap production; so it was also accused of raising the price of potash.[14] The sale of the new soap did not go as well as expected. Accordingly, in 1637, the company was relaunched as the London Soap Company, now incorporating the chief London soap boilers who had been excluded and prosecuted earlier. The use of whale oil and foreign potash resumed, and the old soap came to be produced and sold again, albeit at a higher price.[15] One of the most important project related to the domestic economy thus affected washerwomen and soap-makers alike.

Once the Long Parliament assembled in 1640, the soap monopoly was condemned for its infringement upon soap-makers' freedom. Scholarly accounts since the end of the nineteenth century followed suit, giving the Westminster soap monopoly a symbolic place in England's transformation into a modern industrial nation. As Edward Hyde Price put it, 'no more rigid monopoly could have been asked or desired'; 'Although for a time the

[11] *A short and true relation concerning the soap-busines* (1641), pp. 10, 16; Rushworth, *Collections*, vol. 2, pp. 165-6, 189-91, 252-3.
[12] See TNA, SP 16/273, fols. 76, 85.
[13] Larkin (ed.), *Stuart Royal Proclamations*, vol. 2, pp. 395-408, 428-33, 449-53.
[14] TNA, SP16/279, fol. 149, Petition of divers Citizens of London using the trade of soapmaking to the King, [undated] [1634?]. Potash produced south of Cambridge was bought up for the Westminster Company. See SP 16/250, fol. 144.
[15] Larkin (ed.), *Stuart Royal Proclamations*, vol. 2, p. 583; SP 16/279, fol. 147.

efforts to curb the crown in its encroachments upon private liberties seemed to have been in vain, the permanent outcome was the triumph of freedom.'[16] This line of interpretations was accepted with some nuances well into the late twentieth century.[17] Kevin Sharpe's 'revisionist' account then challenged them, portraying the monopoly instead as a fraught process of squeezing maximum revenues from the unwilling population while sending strong messages.[18] Sharpe's account did revise the image of the tyrannical rule out of touch with reality, but did so without altering the existing focus on officials and affected male producers. Subsequent accounts of the early Stuart period have focused mostly on religion, politics, global trade and imperial expansion.[19] As for England's domestic economy, accounts celebrating England's precocious success have been on the revival.[20] There are few reappraisals of the soap monopoly except an informative financial history by D'Maris Coffman exploring the monopoly's legacy for

[16] Edward Hyde Price, *The English Patents of Monopoly* (Boston, 1906), pp. 123, 132. See also William Cunningham, *The Growth of English Industry and Commerce in Modern Times, Vol. 1 The Mercantile System* (6th edn., Cambridge, 1925) [first published in 1882], p. 307; Samuel R. Gardiner, *History of England from the Accession of James I to the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of the Civil War, 1603-1642* (10 vols., London, 1884), vol 8, p. 72; George Unwin, *The Guilds and Companies of London* (London, 1908), pp. 321-3, 327-8; Scott, *Joint-Stock*, vol. 1, pp. 210-15. The new company of 1637 meant that those London soap makers who had originally resisted the monopoly became part of the new corporation. Complex legacies of this arrangement would be examined in a separate article about London soap boilers.

[17] See, for example, Charles Wilson, *England's Apprenticeship, 1603-1763* (second ed., London, 1984), p. 103; Derek Hirst, *Authority and Conflict: England 1603-1658* (London, 1986), p. 172.

[18] Kevin Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (New Haven, CT, 1992), pp. 121-3. See also Robert Ashton, *The City and the Court 1603-1643* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 141-2.

[19] Noah Millstone, *Manuscript Circulation and the Invention of Politics in Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 2016); Laura A. M. Stewart, 'Introduction: Publics and Participation in Early Modern Britain', Journal of *British Studies*, 56 (2017), 709-730; Rupali Mishra, *A Business of State: Commerce, Politics, and the Birth of the East India Company* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Lauren Working, *The Making of an Imperial Polity: Civility and America in the Jacobean Metropolis* (Cambridge, 2020); Edmond Smith, *Merchants: The Community that Shaped England's Trade and Empire, 1550-1650* (New Haven, CT, 2021); Misha Ewen, *The Virginia Venture: American Colonization and English Society, 1580-1660* (Philadelphia, PA, 2022).

[20] Paul Slack, *The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2015); Joel Mokyr, *The Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2016). Dr Anton Howe has been preparing a related monograph.

the soap excise later introduced by the Long Parliament, and more recently Vera Keller's history of science approach to the subject.[21]

As a result, no account has probed deeper into the soap monopoly and its repercussions with an explicitly gendered perspective. This is surprising because laundry is known to have been performed predominantly by women much like other housework such as cleaning, cooking, collecting water and the provision of light and fire. As Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood have suggested, more than 90% of laundry would have been performed by women, and such tasks were 'easily assigned a monetary value'.[22] By 1600, in fact, even young teenagers arriving in London could expect their apprenticeship contracts to include laundry alongside meals and lodging.[23] Even those poor inhabitants receiving relief money from their parishes were often given extra sums so that they could have their laundry done by others.[24] Just under 10 % of female workers in London would have earned a living by the laundry trade, with further 25% working as servants whose jobs often included washing. Given that the City of London and its environs had an estimated population of about 350,000 in the 1630s, between 9,000 and 30,000 women would have been involved in laundry in London alone.[25] The soap monopoly thus disrupted a significant informal sector.

[21] D'Maris Coffman, *Excise Taxation and the Origins of Public Debt* (Basingstoke, 2013). pp. 21-2, 109-27; Vera Keler, *The Interlopers: Early Stuart Projects and the Undisciplining of Knowledge* (Baltimore, MD, 2023), esp. pp. 112-19.
[22] Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood, 'The Gender Division of Labour in Early Modern England', *Economic History Review*, 73 (2020), 3-32, at p. 31; Whittle, 'Critique', p. 69 (quotation).
[23] I owe this information to Jane Humphries of Oxford.
[24] North, *Sweet and Clean*, pp. 235-7.
[25] Peter Earle, *A City Full of People: Men and Women in London 1650-1750* (London, 1994), p. 116; Falcini, 'Cleanliness', pp. 102-3; Roger Finley, *Population and Metropolis: The Demography of London 1580-1650* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 156; Vanessa Harding, 'The Population of London, 1550-1700: A Review of the Published Evidence', *London Journal*, 15 (1990), 111-128. To arrive at a conservative estimate, I have assumed that the active female workforce represented only less than a quarter of the total population.

If we turn to the gender history of the period, except for aristocratic women, existing accounts have tended to suggest that women's political activities were limited to exceptional periods of dearth and wars, or in pursuit of religious beliefs, personal relief, and access to common lands and other 'common-pool resources' like fens and tree branches as fuel. Most social history studies of ordinary women have focused on the female experience at the local level - what Keith Wrightson has called the 'politics of parish', and on what Alexandra Shepard has called the 'moral authority' of women and men within the household and neighbourhood in which they were located.[26] Notable examples include pioneering works by Laura Gowing, Bernard Capp and Eleanor Hubbard. These excellent works are fully alert to women's remarkable agency and its limitations.[27] There are also important works on female servants and washerwomen in pre-industrial England and Europe, but these rarely explore their agency in relation to state interventions.[28] Brilliant scholars have worked on ordinary women's daring actions during the revolutionary decade of the 1640s.[29] Women could also exert considerable

[26] Keith Wrightson, 'The Politics of the Parish in Early Modern England', in Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Steve Hindle (eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (New York, 1996), 10-46; Alexandra Shepard, 'Provision, Household Management and the Moral Authority of Wives and Mothers in Early Modern England', in Michael J. Braddick and Phil Withington (eds.), *Popular Culture and Political Agency in Early Modern England and Ireland: Essays in Honour of John Walter* (Manchester, 2017), 73-89.

[27] Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996); Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003); Eleanor Hubbard, *City Women: Money, Sex, and the Social Order in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 2012).

[28] The terms washerwoman and laundress are used interchangeably here. Their tasks often overlapped with those of household servants. On the soap monopoly, see North, *Sweet and Clean*, pp. 217-18. On laundresses, see Aritha van Herk, 'Invisible Laundry', *Signs*, 27 (2002), 893-900; Carole Rawcliffe, 'A Marginal Occupation? The Medieval Laundress and her Work', *Gender & History*, 21 (2009), 147-169; Falcini, 'Cleanliness', ch. 4 (eps. pp. 96-100, 103-15); Jenny Dyer, 'Georgian Washerwomen: Tales of the Tub from the Long Eighteenth Century', *Continuity and Change*, 36 (2021), 89-110. See also Tim Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender, 1660-1750* (Abingdon, 2000); Tim Reinke-Williams, *Women, Work and Sociability in Early Modern London* (Basingstoke, 2014); Charmian Mansell, *Female Servants in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2024).

[29] Ann Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution* (Abingdon, 2012); Amanda Jane Whiting, *Women and Petitioning in the Seventeenth-Century English Revolution: Deference, Difference, and Dissent* (Turnhout, 2015); John Walter, *Covenanting Citizens: The Protestation Oath and Popular Political Culture in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2016); Edward Vallance, 'A Democratic Culture? Women,

political agency where policies hinged upon their collaboration, as shown by Allyson Poska's study of migration policies in the late eighteenth-century Spanish empire.[30] We might therefore expect women's comparable agency in England before 1640. Yet there is a strange dearth of in-depth studies in the run-up to the revolution. We are therefore left with an impression that, under Charles I's Personal Rule, ordinary women's political participation was largely limited to the 'local level, usually over minor and non-ideological issues which affected their lives more directly.'[31]

Despite the tremendous bodies of scholarship, then, we know little about how washerwomen responded when their essential work was disrupted by the invasive monopoly, and how their responses in turn fed into the wider constitutional crisis. Tackling these questions is important. For, only by doing so, can we begin to chart exactly in what ways the outbreak of the Civil Wars marked an 'intensification of [women's] existing roles' as Patricia Crawford put it.[32]

Citizenship and Subscriptional Texts in Early Modern England', in Cesare Cuttica and Markku Peltonen (eds.), *Democracy and Anti-Democracy in Early Modern England, 1603-1689* (Leiden, 2019), 260-278. See also the informative survey in Alice Miranda O'Driscoll, 'Women, Gender, and Siege during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, 1639-52' (Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Cambridge, 2021), pp. 16-22.

[30] Allyson M. Poska, *Gendered Crossings: Women and Migration in the Spanish Empire* (Albuquerque, NM, 2016).

[31] See Capp, *Gossips*, pp. 290, 319 (quotation at p. 290); Hubbard, *City Women*, p. 188; Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720* (Oxford, 1998), p. 393. On ordinary women's political agency see also Martha Howell, 'The Problem of Women's Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe', in Sarah Joan Mora and Amanda Pipkin (eds.), *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries, 1500-1750* (Leiden, 2019), 21-31; Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, 'Introduction' in Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (ed.), *Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity* (Amsterdam, 2021), 9-22.

[32] Patricia Crawford, 'The Challenges to Patriarchalism: How Did the Revolution Affect Women?', in John Morrill (ed.), *Revolution and Restoration: England in the 1650s* (London, 1992), 112-128, at p. 118.

With these goals in mind, the article focuses on the experience of washerwomen in London during the 1630s, the largest city in England and the largest centre for soap production at the time. The remainder of this article first reconstructs the remarkable agency and responses of London washerwomen, before turning to *their invisibility in its making*: exactly how these women's daring responses to the monopoly began to be distorted as soon as they took actions. To do so, we shall combine sources like Privy Council records and State Papers conventionally used by political and economic historians of the period, with those used more frequently by gender and social historians, such as parish registers for births, marriages and burials, tax returns, surveys and most importantly London church court depositions. The marrying of sources, and of the local and the national, has been pioneered by studies of popular politics and riots.[33] By adopting this approach to the political economy of soap and laundry under the Personal Rule, we will discover the identity of one poor woman, Elizabeth Tucker, who petitioned against the monopoly and whose name reached the Privy Council attended by the king. We will find out about the latent critique of the soap monopoly mounted by women like Tucker. We will also see how these women frightened London mayor, and how the king and elite men gossiped about the incident. If the dramatic demise of monopolies and the assertion of male producers' liberties in the 1640s became a cornerstone for the constitutional revolution and the attendant liberal discourses, it was by co-opting ordinary women's profound contributions while making them invisible at the same time. The article will end by exploring the episode's implications for how to conceptualize women's political agency.

[33] In addition to Walter, *Covenanting Citizens*, see also M. J. Braddick, *Parliamentary Taxation in Seventeenth-Century England: Local Administration and Response* (Woodbridge, 1994), pp. 177-85, 187-92, 285-6; John Walter, *Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution: The Colchester Plunderers* (Cambridge, 1999); John Walter, *Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2006).

II

Product Quality, Ecology and Washerwomen's demonstration

Women played an indispensable role *well before* the monopoly was imposed upon their soap. Their role must be highlighted first in order to appreciate how their responses helped undermine the soap monopoly. To manufacture soft soap, producers mixed potash with animal oil and/or plant-based oil. The quality of the end product, however, was not easy to discern as it was usually kept in the barrel and sold in bulk or in smaller batches. So it was difficult for buyers to ascertain product quality at the time of purchase. Already in 1620, a London mayor and aldermen received a report urging to establish quality standards so as 'the buyer bee not deceived'.[34]

For verifying quality women's expertise proved indispensable. This was because women, dominating the trade, possessed a body of hands-on knowledge. Printed manuals for domestic servants in fact provided virtually no information about the exact procedures involved in the washing and 'scouring' of cloths. Authors of these manuals assumed their (mostly female) readers simply knew what the 'washing' or 'scouring' of cloths was about.[35] Even laundry in navy ships was usually carried out by women onboard.[36] The tacit knowledge about soap was held mostly by women.

This explains why six laundresses were summoned in the Guildhall when the City authorities sought to verify the quality of different soaps in 1624. They were ordered to wash sample cloths and dry them for two days. Their public demonstration was intended

[34] London Metropolitan Archives [hereafter LMA], COL/AD/01/032, Letter book GG, 1617-1620, fol. [281v].
[35] North, *Sweet and Clean*, p. 214; Falcini, 'Cleanliness', pp. 116-17.
[36] Mansell, *Servants*, p. 113. Elaine Murphy of the University of Plymouth is working on women serving on and off naval ships. I thank her for the information.

to establish whiteness, scent, the amount of soap required, and the extent of the wash.[37] The Westminster Soap Company followed suit. When the proposal for establishing the company was considered in April 1632, its promoters likewise had a few laundresses perform a demonstration with the new soap. Although no exact detail is given about the process, we know that the public appraisal was intended to establish goodness, scent, 'Marchantablenes' (presumably meaning marketability) and the potential damage to the cloth so washed.[38]

The demonstration did not turn out as intended, however. To understand why, it is necessary to consider ecological constraints involved in switching to English raw materials. Traditionally, the production of English soft soap mostly relied on foreign potash imported via the Baltic, potash made of hardwood like conifer. This was partly because producing potash required an enormous amount of wood fuels to be burned, something harder to find in England with limited wood reserves.[39] Imported potash was preferred also because English potash was produced generally from straw, ferns, or bracken and was of much inferior quality - 'more sharp and corrosive' with higher alkalinity.[40] The new soap accordingly ended up damaging washerwomen's hands. This explains the reported result of the demonstration: ‘our S[er]vants and other washing women doe utterly dislike the same’. The grant was made nevertheless.[41] The monopoly

[37] TNA, SP 14/164, fol. 33, ' Account of trials made before Sir Edw. Barkham and other aldermen and commoners of London, April 7 and 13 [1624]'.
[38] TNA, SP 16/215, fol. 213, Sir John Gore and eight others to the Lord Mayor and the Court of Aldermen, [April?] 1632.
[39] Paul Warde, 'Trees, Trade and Textiles: Potash Imports and Ecological Dependency in British Industry, c. 1550-1770', *Past & Present*, 240 (2018), 47-82, p. 49. On the scarcity of English wood reserves, see Keith Pluymers, *No Wood No Kingdom: Political Ecology in the English Atlantic* (Philadelphia, PA, 2021).
[40] Malachy Postlethwayt, *The Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (2 vols., 1766), sv. pot-ash (sig. 7B a). See also North, *Sweet and Clean*, p. 209; Susan Fairlie, 'Dyestuffs in the Eighteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, new series, 17 (1965), 488-510, pp. 495, 505.
[41] TNA, SP 16/215, fol. 213 (quotation).

was approved by ignoring the substandard quality of the new soap confirmed by the washerwomen involved.

Significantly, those opposing the Westminster Company also relied on washerwomen and their demonstration. Bristol, another centre of soap production, had the Soap Corporation unlike London, and its records show that they demonstrated the quality of their soap and thereby won a concession from the Westminster company. In early October 1633, Francis Conningsby, the Inspector General of the Westminster Company, visited Bristol, armed with the new soap and an army of washerwomen. They visited Bristol soap makers' houses and shops in order to establish 'whether it were [made] Accordinge to the Standard And Assaye allowed & admitted by the said letters pattents.'[42] Both the New Soap and the Bristol soap were tested by washerwomen from the two cities. The Bristol soapboilers' minutes record the outcome: 'it Did appeare and it was soe Confessed by the said Captaine Conningsby That the saide Bristoll Sope was as good in all respects as the saide Soape by him produced.'[43] The inspector did the confirmation while washing was performed by women.

The soap monopoly thus hinged upon the verification of product quality based on what Helen Smith has called 'mixed-sex collaboration'.[44] Under Charles' Personal Rule, women's toiling hands thereby became entangled with elite men's concerns about improving the balance of trade, and stabilizing the deteriorating Crown finance amidst underlying ecological constraints. Conversely, we should expect, women's responses to the monopoly had the potential to shape and reshape some of these larger concerns.

[42] Harold Evan Matthews, *Proceedings, Minutes and Enrolments of the Company of Soapmakers, 1562-1642* (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1940), pp. 194-5 (at p. 195).
[43] Matthews, *Proceedings*, p. 195. The competing reputation or 'credit' of the old soap and the new was also to be confirmed 'the Salters, Grocers, Chaundlers & other great buyers of soape'. See SP 16/279, fol. 149, a petition of divers London citizens to the king [n.d. 1634?].
[44] Helen Smith, *Grossly Material Things: Women and Book Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2012), p. 18.

III

Resisting the new soap

Washerwomen's knowledge was not simply appropriated by those men promoting or resisting the Crown-backed monopoly. They also resisted the new soap themselves, including sick, pregnant, and desperately poor women. It is of course not easy to reconstruct their responses as they seem to have left no record themselves. We cannot rely on the persecuted London soap boilers either. Manuscripts written by these men have not been found. Their 1641 pamphlet, *A short and true relation concerning the soap-business*, recorded their sufferings and resistance, most likely in order to lobby the Long Parliament. Yet it never mentioned washerwomen.[45] Having said that, we can begin to triangulate these women's responses based on sources *about* these London soap boilers. At the Privy Council meeting on 6 December 1633, it was reported that some women were spreading rumours against the new soap. Notice how these women were depicted as passive entities ‘raised up’ by unidentified 'turbulent p[er]sons', most probably London soap-boilers:

> Yet some turbulent p[er]sons, have raised up women, and some of meane condic[i]on in the Streete in open manner to publish [i.e. to make publicly known] that the Sope made by the Patentees, [1] washeth not so white nor [2] so Sweete; [3]nor goes soe farre in extent of washing as the old Sope, and [4] that it also

[45] *Short and true relation* (1641). For the subsequent parliamentary prosecution, see Parliamentary Archives, HL_PO_JO_10_1_72_1641, Mr Sargent’s notes of the soap delinquents, 30 Oct. 1641.

> Spoyleth, and burneth the lynen, and [5] fretteth the Hande of those that wash therewith more then the old Sope did.[46]

To begin with, we cannot follow the official record to dismiss those opposing the monopoly as 'turbulent p[er]sons'. For example, legal disputes arising from London soap-boilers' contract with Greenland merchants (selling Whale oil) suggest that they were capable of exploring loopholes in the proclamations, and exploit them to their advantage. Never a crew of illiterate artisans, they were conversant with legal and public politics at the time.[47]

What about their women counterparts? Can we suppose that these women really were passive actors, being ‘raised up’ by well-organised soap boilers or some 'certain Refractory, and contemptuous persons', as noted elsewhere in Privy Council records? The reported rumour quoted above listed five particular objections against the new soap: whiteness, 'sweetness' (i.e. scent), the extent of wash, damage to the linen washed, and finally the damage on the washerwomen's hands. These are strikingly similar to the criteria used in the demonstrations of 1624 and 1632 discussed above - 'whiteness', 'goodness, sweetnes, and Marchantablenes' as well as perceived damages to the linen so washed. The similarity is not strong enough on its own to suggest *active agency* on women's part. Yet given that the verification of product quality relied heavily upon washerwomen, we must be careful not to suppose that they 'necessarily acted at the command of their "betters"'.[48] Servants and washerwomen were often depicted in early

[46] TNA, SP 16/252, fols. 40-[40v], Dec. 6 1633, 'An ordr at [Privy] Councell table whereby the reference is made to the Lord Mayor Sir Wm Balfore etc for tryall of sope'.
[47] In addition to *Short and true relation*, see TNA, C78/378, no. 11, Chancery Decree Orders, Sir John Merricke et al v. Thomas Overman and Edmond Whitewell, 4 Feb. 1636.
[48] John Walter, 'Faces in the Crowd: Gender and Age in the Early Modern English Crowd', in Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster (eds.), *The Family in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2007), 96-125, p. 120. Early modern records often attributed women's actions to men's initiatives. See Andy Wood,

modern cultural productions as gossiping as they performed various tasks. As Richard West noted: 'You that at Conduicts, and such other places, / The ale-house, bake-house, or the washing block / Meet daily, talking with your brazen faces, / Of peoples [and] matters which concerne you not'.[49] As Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson have shown, we should expect that those who performed laundry work often moved from house to house 'carrying gossip around communities' as they worked.[50]

What these women helped spread indeed circulated widely, within and beyond London. It thereby undermined the monopoly by shaking the credibility, both of the product and ultimately of those involved. The ambitious intervention into soap production during the 1630s created an intimate link - possibly surprising for historians - connecting women's physical labour, the credit-based economy and the fate of the royal monopoly.[51]

A case in point is a petition from a London soapmaker Stephen Harrison. It highlighted his plight to the Privy Council: 'having endeavoured himself to sell of the new Sort of Soape [he] can sell but little, and that w[i]thout Creditt or profitt, and now can gett none at all that is good to serve his customers'.[52] This is revealing. Firstly, the product quality was so bad that Harrison was unable to 'serve his customers', some of whom would have included women.[53] Notice, secondly, that having a stock of new soap

'Subordination, Solidarity and the Limits of Popular Agency in a Yorkshire Valley, c. 1596-1615', *Past & Present*, 193 (2006), 41-72, p. 64.

[49] British Museum, 1973,U.216, 'Tittle-Tattle; Or, the several Branches of Gossipping', n.d. [c. 1560-1600]; Richard West, *The court of conscience, or Dick Whippers Sessions* (1607), [sig. F] (quotation).

[50] Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England* (New Haven, CT, 2017), p. 61. For corroborating evidence, see Mendelson and Crawford, *Women*, p. 209; Mansell, *Female Servants*, pp. 1, 56, 196; Bob Pierik, 'Where was Women's Work? Gender, Work and Urban Space in Amsterdam, 1650-1791', *Women's History Review*, 32 (2023), 312-333, p. 316; Yvonne Verdier, *Façons de Dire, Façons de Faire: La Laveuse, la Couturière, la Cuisinière* (Paris, 1979), pp. 131-5.

[51] The classic work on credit remains Craig Muldrew, *Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (London, 1998).

[52] TNA, SP 16/303, fol. 129, a petition of Stephen Harrison of London, soapmaker to the Privy Council.

[53] For the presence of women among buyers of the new soap, see TNA, E 101/634/38.

afforded no 'Creditt or profitt'. Being rejected by customers, having a stock of new soap did not make him more creditworthy. Had he possessed goods that were readily sold or highly sought after, then the expectation of future sales would have enabled him to do other transactions on credit. If the commodity in question was highly sought after, then Harris could have even adopted a 'subscription' model, demanding payment from his customers upfront (say, for a barrel of soap), only delivering the item over time in smaller units. These options were unavailable. Instead, Harrison pleaded he had lost 'all that w[hi]ch with greate care & payne he gayned in 25 yeares before'.[54] Behind Harrison's declining fortune, then, was a community of business partners, and buyers and users of soap sharing negative judgement on the monopoly soap.

Damaging information could spread well beyond London with the show of defiance, as the London merchant John Howe found out. He was working closely with the Westminster Company, sending the new soap to provincial merchants. In July 1634 Anthony Kyrle of Hull told Howe of the new soap's terrible reputation:

> this place [Hull], Yorke, & the country are growne soe insolent, & confident, that they refuse to deliver into officers hands, any soape founde, & affirme they will justifie the sale of the [old] speckled soape, giveinge faule and containetious speeches both to the newe soape, & parties dealinge in & for it nowe they trye the newe w[i]th water & affirme the halfe of it to be Lyme, chalke, or other unproffitable & unusefull matter.[55]

Notably, the public hostility against the new soap and the defiant sales of the prohibited old soap was 'justifie[d]' by a trial, most likely with washerwomen as in the case of Bristol soap makers. This trial also fuelled resistance to searchers acting for the

[54] SP 16/303, fol. 129.
[55] TNA, SP 16/271, fol. 91, Anothny Kyrle, Hull to John Howe over against the Stocks in the Poultry, London, 8 July 1634.

Westminster company: one John Johnson of Hull ‘hath most malignantely spoken to the parties w[hi]ch went to searche’; he 'selleth oulde soape himselfe ... w[hi]ch discourageth any to meddle w[i]th the newe.’ Kyrle's letter suggests that such shows of defiance undermined his own confidence in the monopoly's viability: ‘if a speedy & severe course be not taken I pray you imploye some other heere’. As in Harrison's case in London, stocking up the unpopular commodity represented a significant risk on Kyrle's creditworthiness. So his priority was to sell off the remaining stock and pull out: ‘the [new] soape you mention to be sent, I desire none[;] when this in hande is soulde I shall deliv[er] the moneyes’.[56] In this telling vignette, the product's poor reputation emboldened men like Johnson, helping spread 'insolent & confident' attitudes further across Hull, York and neighbouring areas. Such popular resistance, rooted in women's trials, turned partners like Kyrle away from the business, undermining the economy of credit upon which the monopoly stood.

Washerwomen were involved in petitioning against the new soap as well. According to the London mayor Ralph Freeman, there were petitions against the new soap, and there were in total a few hundred signatures attached to them, some of them signed by women. The mayor reported this to the privy council on 29 December 1633,[57] and some of those involved in petitioning were soon found and examined. While these petitions have not been found, the examination of the tallow chandler Edward Quarrington is very revealing.[58] He started selling the new soap in his shop, and like Harrison who lost his fortune, Quarrington also faced his customers' complaints: 'his Customers did complaine much of the badnes of the new sope, & did desire this Exa[m]in[an]te to p[re]ferre the

[56] TNA, SP 16/271, fol. 91.
[57] TNA, SP 16/254 fols. 72-74v (fol. 74 on signatures), Certificate of Ralph Freeman and others, 29 Dec. 1633.
[58] TNA, SP 16/260 fol.102, Examination of Edward Quarrington, taken before Sir Henry Spiller, Sir William Becher, and Lawrence Whitaker, 10 Feb. 1634. Related manuscripts arising from the mayor’s investigation are SP 16/263 fol. 24; SP 16/259 f.174.

petic[i]on [against the new soap], & to putt their names to it'.[59] Two separate records suggest he lived in Allhallows the Great by the Thames, the fifth poorest of all the eighty-seven parishes within the City walls.[60] His customers may have been his neighbours and he may well have known some of them personally. Yet, perhaps in order to protect his customers, he gave few details about them. Being pressed, Quarrington did give off names of three women who were his neighbours:

> Being demaunded, who they were that did instigate or sett him on to the deliv[er]ing of that petic[i]on w[hi]ch he did deliver to the Lo[rd] Mayor of London touching the new Sope, he saith, that Ursula Gosse, Elizabeth Tucker, & Anne Banner [*insertion*: dwelling all in Thames Streete] did bring in their names unto him, & desire him to have them putt to the petic[i]on[.][61]

A separate marginalia added to Quarrington's petition further states that the named women 'are three of the first that moved the pet[itione]r (as he alledgeth) to prese[n]t the s[ai]d petic[i]on to the Lord Maj[o]r'.[62] Here we have, then, clear evidence of women moving against the new soap: the names of the three women coming to Quarrington's shop most probably as customers, women who complained about the new soap's quality, demanded him to add their names to the petition among other women and men, and allegedly urged him to submit it to the mayor.

[59] TNA, SP 16/260, fol. 102, Examination of Edward Quarrington, 10 Feb. 1634.
[60] Lambeth Palace Library [hereafter LPL], MS 272, fol. 30; LMA, MS 9052/15/5 (will no. 290), Will of Edward Quarrington, April 1665. The ranking is based on the survey results of property prices in 1638. See Gregg Carr, *Residence and Social Status: The Development of 17th Century London* (New York, 1990), pp. 110-12.
[61] TNA, SP 16/260, fol. 102, Examination of Edward Quarrington, 10 Feb. 1634.
[62] TNA, SP 16/259, fols. 130-[130v] (marginalia at fol. 130v), petition of Edward Quarrington, prisoner in Newgate, to the Council, 29 Jan. 1634.

IV

Tracing the Women on Thames Street

Who were the three women demanding Quanrrington to deliver the petition? As the petition has not been found, we cannot ascertain the proportion of women among the signatories, or examine whether the three women's signatures were grouped together with their family members, or entered separately in their own right.[63] If the three women were laundresses or servants buying the new soap, it is usually considered impossible to track them down individually. For, few records about these women survive unless they were working for significant institutions or wealthy families. The standard alternative is to start working collectively.[64] Here, too, we first follow this collective approach.

Thames Street was one of the longest streets within the City Walls, running parallel to the Thames through seventeen parishes.[65] A stone's throw from riverbanks, docks and cranes, inhabitants in these parishes were often involved in water transport and the selling of fish and fish-related products including soap using whale oil. Like All Hallows the Great where Quarrington lived, many of these riverside parishes were relatively poor.[66] The processing of whale oil and other animal fat proved so smelly that Thames Street remained notorious well into the eighteenth century. One Restoration play had a mistress declare that ’I hate a Lover that smells like Thames Street’. John Gay's *Trivia, or The Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716) introduces Thames Street by focusing on the stench wafting from 'Chandlers Cauldrons' boiling whale oil, offending 'Thy breathing

[63] Cf. Walter, *Covenanting Citizens*, pp. 175-7, 204-5.
[64] See Hubbard, *City Women*; Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*.
[65] *London Consistory Court Depositions, 1586-1611: List and Indexes*, London Record Society, 32 (1995), pp. 2-3 (a map of London parishes).
[66] Joseph Foster (ed.), *London Marriage Licences, 1521-1869* (London, 1887), passim; Carr, Residence and Social Status, pp. 110-12.

nostril'.[67] It was in the smelly quarters that Quarrington faced his angry customers including the three women.

Quarrington, however, did not reveal much else to the investigators. Further hints can be gleaned from the mayor's report about those who signed the petitions: 'wee did find out but very few of them, and those of meane condic[i]on whereof the first was beddridd, the second lay in child bed [i.e. in childbirth]. And the Husbands of both disavowed the complaints'.[68] Female signatories thus included a woman sick in bed and another at such an advanced stage of pregnancy that she was giving birth by the time she was being visited by the mayor and his fellow investigators. Moreover, 'one other alleadged the complaintes of her Landresse, whose name shee knew not, and disavowed her owne name in the Petic[i]on'.[69] If this report is to be believed, then another female petitioner was a laundress who had been working most probably on a day-to-day basis, without being remembered who she was by her wealthier female client. Another possibility is that the mistress added her name to the petition on behalf of her washerwoman she hired, but that, upon investigation, she knowingly pretended not to know her name so as to feign innocence.[70]

The mayor's report clearly bears witness to the broader pattern of misrepresentation to be found elsewhere, including rural northern Ghana where women dominate the selling and buying of beans. When men go to local markets led by women, they often end up buying substandard beans or paying more than required. Their wives have hands-on knowledge about beans, so they predictably accuse their husbands of wasting money. Instead of acknowledging women's expertise, these men respond by accusing them of

[67] William Wycherley, *The plain-dealer a comedy* (1677), p. 26; Clare Brant and Susan E. Whyman (eds.), *Walking the Streets of Eighteenth-Century London: John Gay's Trivia (1716)* (Oxford, 2007), p. 184, Bk2, l. 247-53. Cf. North, *Sweet and Clean*, p. 218.
[68] TNA, SP 15/254, fol. 74, Certificate of Ralph Freeman, Lord Mayor, and others, 29 Dec. 1633.
[69] TNA, SP 15/254, fol. 74.
[70] Only the fourth petitioner was named, as Mistress Sweeteing.

enviously protecting female territories.[71] This is akin to what the philosopher Miranda Fricker calls 'testimonial injustice', by which subjects' credibility and competence is discounted by shared 'prejudicial stereotypes'.[72] Something similar may have happened as washerwomen's husbands 'disavowed' their complaints. If so, the investigators and the washerwomen's husbands were oblivious to the subtle difference in product quality. Petitioners' husbands wanted to avoid troubles with authorities, while elite men, including the mayor, had their reasons to highlight the absence of any serious objections to the monopoly.[73] These men's different incentives converged in discounting women's opposition. Another possibility is the washerwomen worked with their husbands based on what Walter has called the 'playful exploitation of their gendered identity', a scenario in which their husbands tactically disavowed their wives oppositions as trivial 'complaints'.[74] If so, humble washerwomen did take action, but had their husbands play along with existing patterns of testimonial injustice in order to dissuade elites from taking further actions. In either case, women's rejection of the new soap and their protest was recorded as insignificant, evidence of bad temper in breach of the ideal female modesty.

Manuscripts found in the State Papers tell us little or nothing about laundresses' living conditions. Yet, church court depositions do. Depositions are witness statements made by deponents called upon during court cases. In church courts that frequently dealt with marriage, divorce and sexual honour, a large proportion (yet not the majority) of these depositions were given by women. When women and men were called to testify, they

[71] Yuka Tomomatsu, *Savanna no gender: Nishi Africa nouson keizai no minzoku-shi* [*Gendered Economies of Agriculture: The Transformation of Everyday Livelihoods in Northern Ghana*, in Japanese] (Tokyo, 2019), pp. 140-1.
[72] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford, 2007), ch. 2-5, esp. p. 32.
[73] As discussed below, Ralph Freeman was involved in whaling trade and thus stood to lose from the monopoly. So it is possible he had no inclination to vigorously the petitioners.
[74] Walter, 'Faces in the Crowd', esp. pp. 111-16, (at p. 114).

gave 'worth statements' which frequently mentioned their livelihood. So they have been studied intensively by social historians of gender.[75]

These depositions confirm that laundry was a low-paid, hard manual labour undertaken by some of the poorest inhabitants.[76] In 1608 a widow testified that she got her living by doing laundry for gentlewomen in her neighbourhood, 'her house having but one room'.[77] In 1616, one Elizabeth Clarke told the court that 'she getteth her living by carrying the water tankard and by washing abroad at goodmen's houses and is little or nothing worth'. One Katherine Osborne testified in 1635 that she was living with her husband in a tenement, and that 'she hath helped to get her living by her labour by carrying of water, washing, and scouring'. Yet, according to her landlord, she was 'scare sober two days in a week'. We need not assume that all those who did washing were desperately poor. As Mansell has found, some female servants who performed laundry among other tasks acquired a degree of literacy, a marker of social distinction.[78] Having said that, legal records suggest many washerwomen were clearly poor, with little to sell except their hard labour.

Among these depositions we do find Elizabeth Tucker who urged Quarrington in 1633. In November 1638, she testified as Elizabeth Tucker, widow, 40 and upwards, of St Martin Vintry, living in the said parish from infancy, and born in the parish of All Hallows the Great where Quarrington also lived.[79] Thames Street ran through the parish

[75] On church court depositions, see Gowing, *Domestic Danger*, pp. 30-58; Mansell, *Female Servants*, pp. 33-56.
[76] On washing as a hard, low-paid task, see North, *Sweet and Clean*, ch. 10. An exception to the rule was the starching for ruffs that required technical mastery. See Hubbard, *City Women*, pp. 214-5; North, *Sweet and Clean*, pp. 224, 232; Natasha Korda, *Labors Lost: Women's Work and the Early Modern English Stage* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011), pp. 95-7. For later periods, see Falcini, 'Cleanliness', pp. 104, 116.
[77] This and the following examples in this paragraph are from Hubbard, *City Women*, pp. 211-12.
[78] Mansell, *Female Servants*, pp.74-5.
[79] LMA, DL/C/B/045/MS09065A/007, Deposition book in testamentary causes, unfoliated, 16 Nov,. 1638, Fisher c. Luckins, Collins and Everes.

of St Martin Vintry, just west of All Hallows the Great; their parish churches were stone's throw from each other. In 1636, during the plague outbreak in London, 'the Churchwardens of St Martins caused & perswaded her to goe into the house' of plague patients to look after them. She was chosen for this hazardous care work presumably because, like other plagues nurses of the period, she had been widowed, poor and 'had sometyme been sick but then was reasonablie well'.[80] Elizabeth was called upon to testify at the London Commissary Court in 1638 because she was one of the carers who heard the dying wish of a parishioner Susan Fisher.

Crucially, Elizabeth Tucker testified that she was living by 'nursekeeping', 'but little worth' - like the other washerwomen mentioned above. Nursekeeping was not as well paid as other works such as midwifery, and the 'work of caring overlapped with that of washing', as Mary Fissell has suggested.[81] It is therefore plausible for Elizabeth to be earning money from both laundry and care-giving that often included washing linen for the sick and the ailing. Some of her neighbours were clearly very poor as well. The survey of 'divided tenements' in 1637 states that there was 'One litle yard and an ancient house' in St Martin Vintry 'nowe inhabited with fifteene families whereof fowerteene have but one roome apeece in wch families are a greate nomber of childrenne most of these families chargable to the p[ar]ish[.]'[82] Tucker was living among those at the lowest strata of the parish community.

Now that we know Tucker lived all her live via the Thames Street, it has been possible to link the deposition with marriage and baptism records. While there were a

[80] Poor and single women were usually those forced to take on the hazardous task of plague nursing. See Lara Thorpe, '"At the Mercy of a Strange Woman: Plague Nurses, Marginality, and Fear during the Great Plague of 1665', in L. Hopkins and A. Norrie (eds.), *Women on the Edge in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam, 2019), 29-44, at p. 38; Keith Wrightson, *Ralph Tailor's Summer: A Scribner, his City and the Plague* (New Haven, CT, 2011),pp. 49, 102-3.
[81] Mary E. Fissell, 'Introduction: Women, Health, and Healing in Early Modern Europe', *Bulletin for the History of Medicine*, 82 (2008), 1-17, at p. 13.
[82] TNA, 16/359, fol. [108v].

number of women named ‘Elizabeth’ getting married with Mr Tucker at the time, there was only one such pair found for the parish of St Martin Vintry in the period and baptizing a child nearby.[83] We are therefore able to connect the world of royal finance and monopolies with one of the poorest women in London, with a level of individual details rarely achieved in previous accounts.[84] When she urged Quarrington in his shop in 1634, Tucker was 35 years old or older, about nine years since her marriage. Her husband William was most likely William the waterman, a humble occupation related to water transport along the Thames. If still alive, her son John would have been 2 years and 2 months. Her husband was either dead by then or to die within four years. Her material and physical condition was so fragile that when the plague struck she would be asked to look after dying patients, and upon survival would describe herself as being 'little worth'.[85] No parish record survives for St Martin Vintry before 1800. It would be extremely difficult to know more about her life except through her husband or by sheer chance discovery.[86]

Women's words and experience related to laundry were never simply mobilized by men for promoting (or resisting) the soap monopoly. Rather, the body of evidence presented thus far suggest that the soap monopoly was in fact opposed by humbler sorts of women, some sick in bed, some expecting a baby, and some doing laundry for other households on an ad-hoc basis. Furthermore, among those who urged Quarrintgon was

[83] For her marraige, see LMA, P69/MTN5/A/016/MS09301, St Martin Vintry, Fragment of parish clerk's rough register of fees for baptisms, marriages and burials(pre-1664), fol. [32v], 8 Feb. [1625]. For a baptism of her son John, see LMA, P69/Alb/A/01/Ms 10107, St Lawrence Pountney, 'A Transcript of all the Marriages, Christennings & Burialls', 1631-2, fol. [78v]. Both are accessed via Ancestry.com [last accessed on 28 March 2024]. Note that there is a conflicting dating of 1627, but it's in a modern hand, and might be mistaken.

[84] Cf. Capp, *Gossips*, pp. 306-11; Walter, 'Faces in the Crowd', pp. 110-18; Walter, *Covenanting Citizens*, pp. 204-5; Lata Mani, *Contention Traditions: The Debate on* Sati *in Colonial India* (Berkeley, CA, 1998), pp. 162-70, 176-7; Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York, 2003), pp. 103-4, 131, 218-23, 250-1, 327-8.

[85] LMA, DL/C/B/045/MS09065A/007, Deposition book in testamentary causes, unfoliated, 16 Nov. 1638, Fisher c. Luckins, Collins and Everes.

[86] William Tucker may have been a member of the Watermen’s company. But its records are mostly available only from 1688 onwards.

Elizabeth Tucker, ‘worth little’, frequently sick in bed, and soon to be asked to look after those dying of plague. It was these women, their everyday use of soap for painstaking labour, that moved them to oppose one of the most important financial projects in pre-revolutionary England.

V

Unheeded voices

In gender history, women's agency 'often slips from being a conceptual tool or starting point to a concluding argument', as in 'washerwomen also had agency'. As Lynn Thomas has warned us, we should go beyond such 'impoverished punch lines'.[87] The next two sections will accordingly move from poorer women’s experience back to the Privy Council, to the wider world of manuscript news and rumours, and eventually to the petitions written by those affected by the royal monopoly. My strategy is to examine them with a studied attention to the evidence of women's agency imprinted on these sources left by men. As Helen Smith's work on early modern book production reminds us, texts ordinarily attributed to men were often scribed, compiled, printed, sold, read and recited by women as well as by men. Those interested in early modern politics and economy can learn from the ways literary historians like Smith go beyond the traditional priority placed upon studying women's (or men's) '"original" composition and "self-expression"'.[88] Doing so would enable us to revisit male-authored petitions, letters, manuscript news, diary

[87] Lynn M. Thomas, 'Historicising Agency', *Gender & History*, 28 (2016), 324-339, at p. 324.
[88] Smith, *Grossly Material*, pp. 9, 52, 216; Margaret J. M. Ezell, 'Invisibility Optics: Aphra Behn, Esther Englis and the Fortunes of Women's Works' in Patricia Phillippy (ed.), *A History of Early Modern Women's Writing* (Cambridge, 2018), 27-45, pp. 31-5, 45; Patricia Pender, *Early Modern Women's Writing and the Rhetoric of Modesty* (London, 2014), p. 7 (quotation).

entries and speeches as visible tips of an iceberg involving mixed-sex interactions. We can thereby start assessing women's political agency afresh, weaving their actions, their political ideas and the erasure of these back into larger historical narratives.[89] How, then, did elite men respond to washerwomen like Elizabeth Tucker?

We do not know exactly when petitions against the new soap were delivered to the London mayor. But by the end of 1633, there were rumours spreading well beyond London about the mayor's response or the lack thereof. On 31 December, Edmund Rossingham, a prolific letter writer active in London, wrote to Sir Thomas Puckering in Warwickshire: 'upon Munday the ~~29~~ 23 the L[or]d Mayer was sent for to the Court, where his Ma[jes]te and the l[or]ds rebuckt him for his partiall proceeding in favour of the old sope, and desparaging of the new'.[90] Nine days later, another letter-writer George Garrard wrote to Thomas Wentworth stationed in Ireland with surprising details about women's direct action:

> The Lord Mayor of *London* by the King's Commandment received a shrewd Reprimand for his Pusillanimity in this Business, being afraid of a Troop of Women that clamorously petitioned him against the new Soap[.][91]

The mayor, wrote Garrard, was ‘afraid of a Troop of Women' who took to petitioning. We know commoners frequently gathered in and outside debating chambers in

[89] This approach has the potential to enrich recent works on popular political participation. See Brodie Waddell and Jason Peacey, 'Introduction: Power, Processes and Patterns in Early Modern Petitioning', in Brodie Waddell and Jason Peacey (eds.), *The Power of Petitioning in Early Modern Britain* (London, 2024), 1-32, pp. 4-6; Koji Yamamoto, *Taming Capitalism before its Triumph: Public Service, Distrust and 'Projecting' in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2018), pp. v, 22-5, 277.
[90] BL, Harley MS 7000, fol. 353-353v, continuing to 352-352v, E[dmund] R[ossingham] to [Sir Thomas Puckering], at fol. [353v].
[91] Knowler (ed.), *The Earl of Strafforde's Letters and Dispatches* [ref to check], vol. 1, p. 176, Garrard to Wentworth, 9 Jan. 1633/4. I've checked PC 2/43 for late Dec. 1633 - Jan. 1633/4, but with no avail.

Westminster and the City to voice their grievances in person. Given this 'politics of access', it is likely that the mayor was in fact confronted face-to-face by a group of angry women like Elizabeth Tucker. No direct evidence has been found about the encounter or the contents of their petition. Significantly, however, the possible impact of this encounter was written down by a puritan William Whiteway, living in Dorchester more than 130 miles southwest of London: 'The King invited himselfe [on 13 February 1634] to the Lord Maijors, to make him amends, for the sharpe words he had lately given him, calling him old foole, for speaking in the behalfe of the Sopeboilers and Laundresses of London.'[92]

Notice that the cause of royal anger was related with some ambiguity. Garrard explained the mayor was ‘being afraid of a Troop of Women’. Rossingham reported it was because of the mayor’s ‘partial proceeding in favour of the old sope, and desparaging of the new'. In Dorchester, Whiteway focused on actors rather than commodities, highlighting Freeman's support of the London soap makers and washerwomen. Like mayor’s actual responses to the washerwomen, no direct evidence has been found of the communication between the mayor and the king. Yet we do know that the mayor Freeman was himself a major importer of whale oil.[93] Of course, it would have been politically dangerous for a mayor to challenge royal policies upfront. Yet Freeman also had his own economic reason not to ignore popular opposition to the new soap made exclusively of domestic raw materials. Thus the 'troop of Women' and their actions reached the London mayor, angered the king, and amused or otherwise interested elite and provincial men exchanging letters and writing down notable events. What if Charles heeded the plea conveyed by the mayor? Such a counterfactual aptly brings women's

[92] *William Whiteway of Dorchester: His Diary 1618 to 1635*, Dorset Record Society, vol. 12 (1991), p. 139 (quotation). The manuscript is BL, Egerton MS 784, pp. 194-5.
[93] C. E. McGee, “‘Strangest Consequence from Remotest Cause’: The Second Performance of ‘The Triumph of Peace’”, *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, 5 (1991), 309–42, at p. 315.

latent agency into sharper focus. Then, these women's painstaking labour and political action not only shook the culture of credit (as it did), but also could have reshaped a complex interplay of royal finance, mercantilism and global commodity chain while leaving strong impressions on the court-city nexus and the information circuits in and outside the metropole.

That was not how things went. The inconvenient truth about the lower quality of the new soap was within reach of elite intelligencers such as Rossingham. (He did imply that the time would soon reveal who is right about the new soap and its unpopularity.)[94] Yet extant evidence point to an emerging pattern of testimonial injustice presenting 'an obstacle to truth, either directly by causing the hearer to miss out on a particular truth, or indirectly by creating blockages in the circulation of critical ideas.'[95] For example, privy councillors had issued a warrant towards the end of 1633 'to bring a poore woman' from Southwark 'for speakeing invectively ag[ain]st the new sope'. She was reportedly 'well chidden, so desmist'.[96] The elite's masculinity of the period clearly rested upon the effective control of women's actions and speeches.[97]

There were also other blockages. Some elite men did admit that the new soap damaged washers' skin, yet alleged that it was due to a kind of conspiracy by opponents – the mixing of materials in order to render it 'unserviciable'.[98] The pattern of perception was symptomatic of the broader political culture at the time that was driven by the 'discovery' of opponents and their tactical and even malicious intent.[99] Rossingham further intimated that the Westminster Company had Queen's laundress Bridget

[94] BL, Harley MS 7000, fol. 352v.
[95] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 43.
[96] BL, Harley MS 7000, fol. 353v, R[ossingham] to [Puckering], 31 December 1633.
[97] Elizabeth A. Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (Abingdon, 1999), p. 59.
[98] BL, Harley MS 7000, fol. 352v, R[ossingham] to [Puckering], 31 December 1633.
[99] Millstone, *Manuscript Circulation*; András Kiséry, *Hamlet's Moment. Drama and Political Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2016). Cf. Walter, *Crowds and Popular Politics*, p. 46.

Sanderson 'subscribe[e]d to the goodnesse of the new sope'. Yet 'shee dares not wash her linen, with any other but Cast[i]le sope and the truth is, that most of those Ladies that have subscribed [in favour of the new], have all of them their linnen washt with Cast[i]le sope, and not with this new sope'.[100] Apparently, those women who publicly supported the new soap seldom used it in favour of hard soap imported from Spain. Rossingham does not tell us whether these women were forced to make false testimonies. Nor have I found another independent source confirming the rumour.[101] In any case, the following point still stands. For male elites pursuing their own interests and royal policies of resource management, women's words that went against their priorities were not worth listening. As for those richer women closer to their cause, the elite men conveniently found them supporting the new soap as expected. The experience of women was therefore varied across the hierarchy. In both cases, however, the female experience of washing was recast, set aside or co-opted according to men's priorities.

This was how the Privy Council went on to tighten the control over the production and retailing of soap in and outside London. As the rumour about the royal displeasure spread further, there were fresh signs of popular resistance, as reported again by Rossingham. This is worth quoting at length:

> Upon friday this last weeke [28 Feb. 1634], there began a great uprore in the Citty, thus. The new companie of sopemen sent out their searchers, to breake into suspected houses [...]. In Southwarke, comeing into a house, a lusty stowt fellew,

[100] BL, Harley MS 7000, fol. 352, R[ossingham] to [Puckering], 31 December 1633.
[101] Imported hard soap were in circulation at the time. See TNA, SP 16/271, fol. 91; SP 16/329, fol. 10.

> fell upon one of these sope serchers, and beate him well favoredly but, yet hee was mastered by others, and led towards some Magistrate[.][102]

Southwark was an area where more than thirty soap-boilers lived in the early seventeenth century.[103] Some of the chief producers, like Thomas Overman, had been recently tried in the Star Chamber. The scale of his family's operation was large, capable of producing 550 tons of soap a year, more than 10% of the production target of the nationwide monopoly.[104] Until they got imprisoned and driven out of the trade, Overman and other soap makers must have been training apprentices and providing soap to a large number of women in the City of London and beyond. How did they respond, now that they had just been deprived of their means to get by? Rossingham's reported 'uprore' conveys a determined, tactical pursuit to rescue the 'stowt' soap-boiler:

> as they [the searchers] were leading him over london Bridge [away from Southwark for an arrest] a whole squadron of weemen attempted to rescue the fellow, but could not; then came in the whole rowt of Apprentices, and for'cst these searchers to protect themselfes in some honest mans house, with their delinquent; these Apprentices began to bee insolent and would faine these serchers into the streete, but the 2 shreiffs soone came, to disperse this unruly multitude.[105]

[102] Bodleian Library, Carte MS 77, fol. 346, Rossingham to Earl of Huntingdon, 7 March 1633[/4].
[103] Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society,* p. 66.
[104] Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society*, p. 78.
[105] Bodleian Library, Carte MS 77, fol. 346. The term 'apprentices' was a catch-all phrase for describing crowds. But this incidence probably involved those directly affected by the monopoly. Cf. John Walter, '"This Infamous, Scandalous, Headless Insurrection": The Attack on William Laud and Lambeth Palace, May 1640, Revisited', *English Historical Review*, 139 (2024), 1059-1087, at p. 1073.

Residential areas of early seventeenth-century Southwark were relatively small. The main street stretched southward from the foot of London Bridge, mostly within a half-mile radius, less than 15 minutes by foot. Some of the soap boilers' houses, targets of the search, would have been only five to ten minutes away from the Bridge.[106] A 'squadron of women' must have arrived at the London Bridge within this short period of time. Only when the women could not stop the arrest, did a group of apprentices join for support. The order of appearance is perhaps significant because women had an 'ambivalent legal status', was considered less prone to legal prosecution, and thus often took actions before men in order to voice common grievances.[107] Like other disciplined 'disorders' studied in different times and places, it would be wise not to accept the description of the crowd as 'unruly' or the whole 'rowt' - a term often used to describe animals. The reality was better captured when Rossingham called these women a 'whole squadron', a term reminiscent of discipline and coordination.

There were of course occasions where such a collective response was not possible. In such cases, resistance could turn violent, with a resolution to 'dye rather then yeild', complete with boiling cauldrons, 'Naked Swords, pistolls & other weapons, and a greate Mastive dogg'.[108] Though well-educated men like Rossingham and privy councillors did not acknowledge, these women and men were on alert, capable of arriving *en masse* in time to resist searchers visiting houses without prior notice.

[106] To arrive at a conservative estimate, I have combined William Morgan, *Map of the Whole of London* [1682], British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/london-map-morgan/1682 [accessed 2 October 2024]; Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society*, pp. 184-5, 'Schematic map of the Boroughside [in Southwark] showing the residential distribution of occupations in 1622'.
[107] Walter, *Crowds and Popular Politics*, p. 41.
[108] TNA, SP 16/333, fol. 53, 'The humble Certificate of Sir Thomas Jay Kt one of his Mats Justices of the Peace for the County of Middlessex', 7 Oct. 1636.

VI

Women's judgement in the petitions against the New Soap

London washerwomen as well as apprentices thus protested against the New Soap, a commodity which was at the forefront of Charles I's mercantile policy.The ultimate impact of their collective resistance was unmistakable. Despite a series of privy council orders and proclamations to enforce the monopoly, the New Soap never achieved the level of market penetration initially anticipated. By 1637, the Westminster Company was forced to restructure as stated above. The monopoly soon came to be denounced by the Long Parliament. The Grand Remonstrances presented to the king in December 1641 condemned 'The monopolies of soap, salt, wine, leather, sea-coal, and in a manner of all things most common and necessary use', along with 'The restraint of the liberties of the subjects in their habitation, trades and other interests.'[109]

In what sense were washerwomen's protests integral to this larger constitutional drama? Did they have a political argument against the monopoly? Or were they complaining primarily about their sore hands? These questions have been raised repeatedly in the early 2020s, so we must take them seriously. The petitions to which Tucker and other women consented (which do not seem to survive) would have been written by educated men with legal expertise. These women probably had only limited literacy, only adding crosses, some symbols or their initials to signal their consent.[110] Having said that, closer inspection also suggests that London washerwomen did more than signing, lobbying, demonstrating, and establishing and spreading the product's poor reputation. Though rarely noted by existing studies, these washerwomen in fact

[109] Gardiner, *Constitutional Documents*, p. 212.
[110] The ability to decipher and mark down initials could afford some agency. See Mark Hailwood, 'Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700', *Past & Present*, 260 (2023), 38–70, pp. 66-8.

contributed to the broader arguments against the soap monopoly in two respects. Firstly, without due acknowledgement, women's knowledge about product quality became a foundation for a range of petitions criticising the monopoly based on *shared consumer judgement*. Secondly, washerwomen may also have been capable of critiquing the monopoly through the rhetorical trope of purity and corruption, a powerful conceptual framework that was explored in depth by some of the best-known writers of the period.

These petitions were submitted from the end of 1633 on behalf of a variety of actors, including those Greenland and Newfoundland merchants trading whale oil, Eastland merchants importing potash in exchange for woolen cloths and other English exports, and of course London soap-makers. These petitions were mostly undated, and so it is hard to establish an accurate chronology or relationship among them. Petitioners' vested interests varied, yet their petitions mostly covered some or most of the following seven points: 1) the liberty of Freemen of the City of London to exercise their chosen trade; 2) soap makers as London Freemen vested with such a liberty; 3) the Westminster Company as an illegal infringement of subjects' liberty defined by the so-called Statute of Monopolies of 1624; 4) the rising price of soap due to the monopoly; 5) damages to Greenland and Baltic trade dealing with key raw materials (whale oil and potash); 6) negative trickle-down effects on industries related to these; and finally, 7) the lower product quality of the new soap and its unpopularity. What role did women's experience play in their argumentation?

One petition, submitted by Greenland merchants, highlighted the superiority of the whale oil by taking the soap maker's perspective: ‘the use thereof for soapmakeinge is more desired then any other oyle espetially before rape oyle'. Then the petition adopted the set of criteria used in public demonstrations and highlighted the consumer preference for the whale oil soap. Whale oil 'makes as good soape to wash as white as sweete & to

goe as farr in use as rape oyle and becomes more vendible in soe much that where one will buy rape oyle soape; tenn will buy the Greenland oyle soape.'[111] If the petition had been submitted in the early months of 1634, then the contrasting demand of one to ten was probably not exaggerated. The weekly sales figures of the old soap made of whale oil were just under 600 barrels. The comparative figure for the new soap, drawn from December 1633 to January 1634, was less than 50 barrels.[112] It is not clear whether the London mayor Ralph Freeman, himself a Greenland merchant, was involved in the crafting of the petition. He died in March 1634. In any case, wealthy Greenland merchants thus highlighted the popularity of the old whale oil soap by adopting the set of criteria featured both in the public demonstrations of product quality performed by women and in the rumours allegedly spread by the 'refractory persons' against the new soap.

Elsewhere, the evidence of strong consumer demand for the whale oil soap lent itself more directly to the critique of the monopoly company. In the petition submitted to the king by 'divers Citizens using the trade of soapmaking', London soap-makers contrasted their experience of traditional soapmaking with 'the pr[e]tended new waie of making of soape'. They argued that the new soap was so bad in the eyes of its users so that in the absence of prohibition the old soap would 'outsell & outvent' the new, which 'is soe much laboured to be brought into creddit by the new Corporac[i]on'.[113] Another petition, submitted by Newfoundland merchants, used the same evidence to criticise the exclusion of the old soap: 'if the new Soape were more usefull and better [and] cheape[r] as the

[111] SP 16/279 f.145, Reasons conceived by the Company of Merchants of England for discovery of New Trades, [n.d. 1634?].
[112] Compare the two surviving sales accounts, TNA, E 101/634/38 for the old soap in 1639; E 101/602/8 for the new soap. No other account has been found so far.
[113] TNA, SP 16/279, fol. 149, 'Petition of divers Citizens of London using the trade of soapmaking to the King' [n.d. 1634?]. No signature is attached to this petition. As this is addressed to the king, this one was mostly likely different from the one signed by Tucker and other women.

Pattentees would pr[e]tend, they needed noe restrainte upon this [whale] oyle' for producing the old soap.[114] The patentees needed such a 'restrainte' and sought to raise the 'credit' of the new soap in vain precisely because they were selling goods of lower quality and lesser utility to these users. The soap-makers' and washerwomen's preference thus provided a ground from which to critique the monopoly as a politically imposed 'restrainte'.

The forced restraint against washerwomen's and retailers' preferences was combined with other considerations to take on global, geopolitical significance. The case in point is another petition from Greenland merchants and Baltic merchants. The prohibition of whale oil in soap production added to the existing demands on olive and rape oil (needed for cooking and cloth-making), thus leading to higher prices. Greenland trade was said to have employed more than 25,000 tons of shipping and 1,000 mariners half of whom 'never were at sea before'. The yearly cost amounted to £12,000, including 'their victualls Caske & implements for fishing all made & taken from within his Ma[jes]ties own dominions'. The prohibition of whale oil thus threatened the virtuous trickle-down effect while enhancing the price of other types of oil. If the Greenland Company did not send voyages the next season, then the Dutch may take over the Greenland trade to a great loss.[115]

This is the broad global and domestic contexts in which the petition turns upon the Westminster Soap company and its dismal prospect. Notice that the critique of the company, linked with global commodity chains, hinged heavily upon consumer preference against the new soap:

[114] SP 16/279 f.147, Petition of divers Merchants trading to Newfoundland to the Council, [n.d. 1634 ?].
[115] SP 16/279 f.143, 'statement of the evils likely to ensue to the Greenland Company and the Eastland Company from the new regulations as to soap'.

> their soape being com[m]onlie soe bad, & ill Conditioned, th[a]t those who have once tried it, are discouraged to buy againe: Yet did the Patentees projects [...] drawe others to them. His Ma[jes]tie for this imaginaries proffitt of 20,000li per ann[um] shall not onelie wholy loose this his Greenland trade; But (if he shall prohibitt potashes according to the intention of his Covernant) diminish one forth parte of his Eastland trade; if not distract the whole. [116]

While the petition did not give credit to women users of the soap, it made it clear that ignoring their refusal and forcibly cutting down the consumption of Greenland whale oil and Baltic potash would lead to the decline of the Greenland and Baltic trades, creating adverse effects on domestic industries supporting long-distant voyages and woollen-cloth manufacturers sending their products eastwards via the Baltic. Those who stood to lose from the soap monopoly thus built much of their critique upon the perceived inferiority of the new soap and users' judgement against it. And yet, very few, if any, of the extant sources explicitly acknowledged their debts to women's actual experience and their corporeal suffering.

VII

Washerwomen's political ideas

Now we can see why women's significant role remained invisible when monopolies were finally denounced in the Long Parliament. On 9 November 1640, less than a week since its opening, its Member John Culpeper delivered a powerful speech against monopolies. It listed a range of domestic items affected by the encroaching hands of the monopolists. Thanks to the pioneering research by Alexandra Shepard, we now know that buying and

[116] SP 16/279 f.143.

maintaining household items was an important task led by women.[117] This well-known passage should thus be read with gendered divisions of household labour in mind:

> Mr. Speaker, I have but one Grievance more to offer unto you, but this one comprizeth many … these [monopolies], like the Frogs of Egypt, have gotten Possession of our Dwelling, and we have scarce a Room free from them. They sup in our Cup. They dip in our Dish. They sit by our Fire. We find them in the Dye-Fat, Wash-Bowl, and Powdering-Tub. … And Mr. Speaker, some of these … shelter themselves under the Name of a Corporation […] Mr. Speaker, I have echoed to you the Crys of the Kingdom[.][118]

Note how monopolies were depicted as something deeply affecting the household economy. The 'dye-fat', also known as dye-vat, was used mostly by men for colouring threads spun by women; the 'powdering tub' was used for the salting of fish and meat undertaken mostly by women.[119] Among these items was a 'wash-bowl', a wooden tab used for laundry. Tellingly, a seventeenth-century edition of the same speech referred instead to a 'Wash House'.[120] When delivering this speech, Culpeper would have worn a crisp white shirt, thoroughly washed and adorned with a neatly starched collar, with woollen garments made of threads spun, dyed and woven through a collective effort involving women as well as men. The quality of these commodities was often confirmed by women, yet their contribution to the nascent critique of these monopolies was made invisible, only obliquely acknowledged as distant 'Cryes of the Kingdom'.

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[117] Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2015).
[118] *Journal of the House of Commons*, vol. 2, p. 55.
[119] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. dye-vat, *n*., powdering tub *n*. 1; Whittle and Hailwood, 'Gender Division', p. 18, 31.
[120] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. wash-bowl, *n*. 1; John Rushworth, *Historical collections the second volume of the second part* (1686), p. 1338.

What kind of 'Crys' were actually heard by the wash-bowl or in the washhouse? As records written by women like Tucker themselves do not survive, it is impossible to answer the question with a traditional standard of archival research. Yet, as scholars of colonial slavery have warned us, historical research can be 'hospitable to silences without turning silent or repeating the violences that, too often, produced them in the first place.'[121] On this count, a revealing hint has been found in a letter from the archbishop of Canterbury William Laud to Thomas Wentworth. Discussing the state of the soap business, Laud jokingly referred to something he would have heard: 'I pray do not take too much of clean linen when you speak of the soap. They say 'tis fouler a great deal than the linen it washes.'[122] The comment came from a leading privy council member who was behind the imposition of monopolies including that of soap. He did not care to mention who 'they' were. Nor do we find the direct evidence of their voices. Yet the reported observation - that the new soap was 'fouler' than the dirty linen - suggests the appreciation of its poor quality. So the comment was based most probably on women's direct experience of working with it. The new soap's poor quality meant that soap - the material symbol of purity - turned out to be an epitome of impurity and corruption. Notice the terrible irony. The Lambeth Palace, in which the archbishop of the land jokingly wrote about this, had its own washhouse, as historical maps suggest. The palace's household accounts also record a regular payment to an unnamed laundress.[123] We have no evidence to know whether she and her fellow washerwomen used the new soap to keep Laud's cloths clean and spotless, while enduring the physical pain of working with the strong

[121] Lauren Coats and Steffi Dippold, 'Beyond Recovery', *Early American Literature*, 55 (2020), 297-320, at p. 299.
[122] *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God, William Laud, Volume 7, Letters* (London, 1860), p. 231, from Laud at Lambeth to Wentworth 23 Jan. 1636.
[123] Leonie James (ed.), *The Household Accounts of William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1635-1642* (Woodbridge, 2019), pp xxiii-xxiv, 13, 22, 29, 48, 56, 122, 130, 138, 164, 186, 192, 204. See also maps of the Place at LPL, TD 216, TD 217, TD 218.

alkaline substance. Yet the symbolic contradiction is clear enough: the highest bishop expected to promote spiritual purity and virtue was imposing the use of soap that was fouler than the dirty linen, forcing physical suffering upon its users nationwide. As Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson have argued, 'some pragmatic, quotidian tasks, especially those that stretched out over long periods of time' like laundry, 'became the site of metaphorical interest'. Ordinary women and men were accordingly 'alive to the metaphorical possibilities of domestic objects and routines'.[124] For them, the soap they were using would have no longer been the agent of cleanliness but the material evidence of an awful policy, one backed by Laud and others, moving around wearing immaculate proofs of their corruption.

The reported hostility to the new soap drew on the prevalent trope of 'inversions', such as virtues masking vices, and a show of piety covering up hypocrisy. As scholars such as Robert Scribner, Stuart Clark and Peter Lake have shown, these binaries provided some of the most powerful frameworks for making sense of complex events and power dynamics in post-Reformation Europe. They were repeatedly invoked in sermons, appeared in visual propaganda, and developed in polemical pamphlets.[125] Under Charles I, in 1636, Richard Brome's play *Antipodes* was performed for the first time, exploring stark contradictions inherent in lawyers promoting injustice under the name of law and order.[126] Soon Thomas Hobbes famously pinpointed the power of inversions to create chaos and confusion: 'some men can represent to others, that which is Good, in the likenesse of Evil; and Evill, in the like-nesse of Good; ... discontenting men, and

[124] Hamling and Richardson, *A Day at Home*, pp. 69, 70.
[125] R. W. Scribner, *For the sake of simple folk: popular propaganda for the German Reformation*, (rev. ed. Oxford, 1994); Stuart Clark, *Thinking with demons: the idea of witchcraft in early modern Europe* (Oxford, 1999); Peter Lake, 'Anti-puritanism: the structure of a prejudice', in Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake (eds), *Religious politics in post-Reformation England* (Woodbridge, 2006), 80–97.
[126] Richard Cave, '*The Antipodes*: Critical Introduction', *Richard Brome Online* (http://www.dhi.ac.uk/brome, accessed 13 Nov. 2024), paragraphs 28-9, 39.

troubling their Peace at their pleasure'. Shakespeare had earlier explored the same perversion in his plays including *Hamlet*, and it later featured prominently in Milton's *Paradise Lost* as Satan's power to tempt Eve.[127] Humanists trained in classical rhetoric would have readily recognised these cases as dangerous examples of *paradiastole*, a rhetorical device at worst capable of redescribing drunkenness as good fellowship, good patronage as corruption, and corruption as friendship, thus casting given moral characters in completely opposite lights.[128]

If the comment did indeed come from women doing laundry in or about Lambeth Palace, then their argument must have been uniquely based on their manual labour (unlike the philosophical or literary analysis of their male counterparts). The term 'foul' is significant in this regard. Things such as 'foul air' and 'foul smoke' were considered detrimental to health and welfare.[129] The critique of the new soap as 'fouler' likely had a corporeal foundation based on women's physical labour and attendant harm - what we would today call occupational hazard. Of course, unlike London soap-boilers, these women were unable to frame their struggles in terms of infringement upon their rights or entitlements. Worse still, women's words and experience were constantly degraded by biting satires even before they took to the streets and went to shop counters to demand change in response. If Washerwomen's political thoughts and actions have never been written into larger historical narratives, that is indicative of a kind of epistemic injustice, especially the 'injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to persistent and wide-ranging

[127] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 119–20 (ch. 17, [87]); Quentin Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 102-112; John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (second ed., London, 2007), ix 694-701.
[128] Skinner, *From Humanism*, pp. 51-3, 91-9. See also Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics Volume 3: Hobbes and Civil Science* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 89-141.
[129] I thank Keith Pluymers for discussion.

hermeneutical marginalization'.[130] Yet we should not trivialize these women's agency either. Those whom the Archbishop of Canterbury did not care to mention by name – 'they' - were capable of denouncing one of the most important domestic mercantile policies promoted by Charles I. Their critique reportedly drew on physical suffering and damage to their occupational health and safety, and was framed in the image of inversion (purity masking corruption) that was familiar across the social strata, rooted at once in ancient rhetorical traditions and explored in depth by writers like Brome and Hobbes.

VIII

Conclusion

The most notorious monopoly under Charles I and its repercussions could no longer be appreciated without taking gender seriously. Washerwomen like Elizabeth Tucker took a centre stage in this story because, as we have found, society's reliance upon their essential work gave them greater political agency than hitherto appreciated. As women dominated laundry, they possessed a body of knowledge needed for establishing the quality of soap. The information about the new soap's poor quality circulated in London and far beyond, undermining the soap's reputation. Women's judgement thereby made it impossible to integrate related business transactions into the web of credit relations that drove the early modern economy.

[130] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 154. Cf. Nedelsky, *Law's Relations*, p. 191. Where such injustice is internalized, then scholars might call this 'hidden injuries' of gender and class. On this see, Andy Wood, 'Fear, Hatred and Hidden Injuries of Class in Early Modern England', *Journal of Social History*, 39 (2006), 803-826.

The new soap was imposed between 1633 and 1637 by ignoring such widespread negative judgement upon the product, and we have found that its enforcement by company searchers elicited stiff oppositions in Southwark as well as in North Yorkshire including Hull and York. A 'troop of women' affected by the new soap even took to submitting a petition directly to the London mayor, sparking widespread rumours about the king's displeasure at his alleged cowardice hundreds of miles away from the metropole. These women included Elizabeth Tucker living in one of the poorest London parishes. Though rarely acknowledged by contemporaries or by historians, washerwomen like Elizabeth Tucker may well have been capable of critiquing the new soap through the powerful trope of 'inversion'. Their experience of washing, their shared judgement against the new soap, even gave a foundation for the argument against the monopoly as marshalled by various petitions against the scheme. These women's remarkable contributions and agency were therefore co-opted and made invisible just as the soap-makers of London elevated their grievances as the dire infringement of Englishmen's rights and liberties. To return to Scott's observation, the rights-based discourse focused on men as it did thanks in part to women's substantial contributions, and despite their remarkable agency.

The case of London washerwomen is significant for how we study ordinary women's political agency. For, their agency clearly went beyond the usual parameters by which we examine how well subordinate actors 'negotiated the system', 'worked around' the constraints or 'strategically positioned themselves' in ways that benefited them.[131] The present case has much to say on these counts, too. But it has also shown how women's actions arising from work routines helped undermine a significant royal monopoly, and fed into the eventual critique of such policies. Thus, as the global historian Lisa Hellman

[131] Howell, 'Women's Agency', p. 24.

has suggested, historians attentive to gendered interactions have the potential to recover 'examples of forgotten stories', ones that can illuminate 'fateful events, sequences leading to path dependent outcomes'.[132]

The story of Elizabeth Tucker and other women therefore serves as a fateful flashpoint, revealing their agency and its rapid disappearance. The evidence of their political ideas remains frustratingly slim. Yet the fact that we have to rely on a series of indirect evidence - maps, account books, archbishop's letter, and its close reading within the contemporary ideas about foulness and inversion - testifies to the unequal politics of record-keeping that have long obscured the experience of plebeian actors like Tucker.[133]

The present case should not be taken as the only, or the most important, moment in the erasure of women from the constitutional drama, of course. Instead, we can now use the findings presented here as a reference point for revisiting everyday work and its politicization under invasive regimes like the Personal Rule of Charles I. Then, as now, the lives of women as well as men became subject to interventions from actors backed by the state. How did they respond? In what ways did the working lives of women and men - their blood, sweat and toil - give them the leverage to protect their lives and even to produce political change?[134] How much have we forgotten?

[132] Lisa Hellman, 'Enslaved in Dzungaria: What an Eighteenth-century Crocheting Instructor Can Teach Us about Overland Globalisation', *Journal of Global History*, 17 (2022), 374-393, at p. 391, drawing on Jeremy Adelman and Jan de Vries.
[133] On the politics of record-keeping, see Laura Helton et al, 'The Question of Recovery: An Introduction', *Social Text*, 33 (2015), 1-18; Alexandra Walsham, 'The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe', *Past & Present* (2016), Supplement 11, 9-48.
[134] Here I am thinking with Margaret R. Hunt and Alexandra Shepard, 'Introduction: Producing Change', in Macleod et. al. (eds.), *The Whole Economy*, pp. 1-25, at p. 24.