

'But to Cover Her Shame'

Respectability, Social Mobility, and the Middling Sort in Early Nineteenth-century England

Popp, Andrew

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Published in:
Cultural and Social History

DOI:
[10.1080/14780038.2021.1936747](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2021.1936747)

Publication date:
2021

License
Unspecified

Citation for published version (APA):
Popp, A. (2021). 'But to Cover Her Shame': Respectability, Social Mobility, and the Middling Sort in Early Nineteenth-century England. *Cultural and Social History*, 18(4), 501-516.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2021.1936747>

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us (research.lib@cbs.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 09. Dec. 2023



“But to Cover Her Shame:” Respectability, Social Mobility, and the Middling Sort in Early Nineteenth-Century England

Abstract

This article explores how one middling English family – the Wilkinsons, shopkeepers in industrializing Lancashire – experienced and negotiated threats to their respectability and social status during the early nineteenth-century. It contributes to the history of downward social mobility, responding to a recent call in this journal for more work on this topic. I use a rich epistolary archive to explore the Wilkinsons experiences.

Key words

Social mobility, family, emotions, gender, business

Introduction

Sarah Wilkinson was to have wed John Parkinson in Colne, Lancashire on the 4th of September 1823, but it was never to be. Sarah was pregnant and Parkinson disputed the paternity. Sarah’s mother, Elizabeth, set out the course of events in letters to her eldest daughter, also Elizabeth. The sense of humiliation and wounded pride is palpable. Something of a “very grievous nature” had occurred. Though the date of the wedding was set, Parkinson had asked for it to be brought forward. Frantic preparations were launched. Sarah’s uncle, John Shaw, was recruited as “Old Father” and meat was bought. Messages crisscrossed Lancashire summoning family members or in search of a silk scarf for the bride. Eventually,

Parkinson call’d here on the Saturday night and said he shd like your uncle Wm Wilkinson to marry them next morning and for that purpose went directly to your uncle and after that to our parson – your uncle waited in the church two hours on the Sunday morning

In the end, Parkinson “sent word he cd not be married on Sunday”. Further interviews between Parkinson and members of the Wilkinson family followed but “he still made some excuse”, even as he maintained that “he had not said he wd not marry her”. Eventually a reason was confessed, “he said some of his friends had told him something which he did not know – we press’d him much to tell us – he said it wd hurt our feelings – he might do it sometime”. Presumably this was news of Sarah’s pregnancy, though whether it was really previously unknown either to him or to Sarah’s family

we cannot know.ⁱ Over the following weeks the family waited to see if Parkinson “wd make any further proposals but to no purpose”. He was, Sarah’s mother concluded, “one of the greatest hypocrites – it appears he cd not obtain his purpose without bringing things so very near a crisis”. The marriage never took place.

These events left Elizabeth Sr. despairing and resigned, seeking a “meekness (a perfect resignation to the will of God, though troubles await me I trust they will eventually work for my good”). As shopkeepers and pious Methodists, the Wilkinsons exemplified the middling sorts. Certainly, they were anxious about the damaging social consequences that might flow from these events. But Sarah had and kept her baby, and the family defended their respectability and social status. This paper explores how the Wilkinsons understood respectability and social status, how both came under threat, and the family strategies they enacted in response. It is a contribution to the underdeveloped historical literature on downward social mobility. It reinforces recent work that locates the experience of social mobility within the context of the family and family strategy, whilst also recognising the importance of placing the family within a wider community context. Simultaneously, for the Wilkinsons, as for many of the middling sort, family, status and family strategies were also deeply entangled with family business, and thus inseparable from the economicⁱⁱ

Social Mobility, Family, and Business

Bellaigue, Mills, and Worth recently argued that “the history of social mobility in modern Britain has been relatively under-researched since the publication of several key studies in the 1990s”.ⁱⁱⁱ This article builds on the specific claim that there has been a neglect of downward social mobility.^{iv} As Bellaigue et al. argue, studies of social mobility often examine “the connections between industrialization, modernization and social class formation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”, capturing the historical context for this study in the cotton districts of Lancashire in the early nineteenth-century.^v Even as Britain was experiencing industrialization an individualistic narrative of social ascent through industriousness and self-help became the dominant framing for discussions of social mobility. More recently historians have called into question “the notion of the industrial revolution as fostering the rise of ‘self-made men’ and the formation of the middle class”.^{vi} Increasingly, it has become apparent that the “opportunities for long-range social mobility provided by capitalization of industry were, on the whole, limited.”^{vii} In response, Bellaigue and others have stressed the importance to many of social stability and the maintenance of social status. Moreover, what “movement there was tended to be around the boundaries between the lower middle and upper working classes”. This was precisely the social zone occupied by the Wilkinsons.

Maintaining social stability depended on family strategies. Thus, I study “the experience of social mobility as a complex familial and relational project, involving women, as well as men ... social mobility as ‘family praxis’”.^{viii} Social mobility, as a process and as experienced, emerges as deeply relational, revealing how significant children were to family strategies, but also, more importantly, highlighting the centrality of gender in processes and experiences of social mobility. Past analyses have tended to “play down internal power dynamics and gendered hierarchies within families, and tends to deny agency to those involved, particularly under-recognising women’s ability to influence decisions about family life”.^{ix} Recognising the familial context and nature of social mobility prompts us to confront the emotional complexities involved. Experiences of social mobility can be driven by and provoke a wide range of emotional responses. This article is thus framed by an approach to the historical study of social mobility that is rooted in the family context, promoting the importance of children, women, and emotions.

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s *Family Fortune’s* provides a panoramic overview of the wider societal context within which the men and women of the English classes shaped and enacted family strategies between 1780 and 1850. Davidoff and Hall claim that in the early nineteenth-century the middle classes experienced “heightened fear about both social and economic chaos”, leading them to develop a “preoccupation” with “carving up the world into discrete categories and classes”, suggesting the period we are studying was subject to increased class anxiety.^x Arguing that gender and class always operate together, they also track significant change, the inexorable exclusion of women from the public realm and from business. This process produced ambiguities, contradictions, and tensions as it unfolded, such that even as they were being restricted to the domestic many families remained dependent on women’s labour, capital (financial and social), and standing. Moreover, some women, such as the widowed, were expected to be independent and self-supporting. Such changes may have been driven by developments in culture, society, and economy but they were negotiated by individuals experiencing family as a set of practices and expectations in specific community contexts. Outside the family, the emphasis falls equally on the influence of business and religion as they converged on the home as most important setting for middle class family life. Indeed, “Family, hearth and home were both rationale and setting for the business enterprise while domestic ideals increasingly set the terms of economic activity”.^{xi} The Wilkinsons, men and women, were deeply enmeshed in the tasks of navigating these societal shifts. *Family Fortunes* directs our attention to these negotiations as they played out at the micro-level in a family in business. It allows also for comparison and we will see that the Wilkinsons’ experiences often closely echoed those of their equivalents in Birmingham and Essex.

In *Family and Business in the Industrial Revolution* Hannah Barker explores many of the issues central to *Family Fortunes* but with a focus on North-West England. Specifically, Barker focuses on the interaction of business and family amongst the middling sort engaged in “trade”. The Wilkinsons belonged to this group. Barker foregrounds the precarity of social status amid ongoing social flux and frequent financial and business crises. Rooting her study in both the complexity of families and the complex factors shaping social status and family strategies, and laying bare the impossibility of treating family and business as separate spheres, Barker explores such issues as: the social status of particular forms of “trade”; ideals of how families *should* behave; the frequent use of familial partnerships – and their equally frequent dissolution, sometimes in acrimony; an attachment to maintaining harmony; frictions attending pressure on physical space; the importance of a gerontocratic order that placed women at the head of households, and firms, in the absence of an appropriate male; and turbulent in-law relationships – all of which we will find echoed by the Wilkinsons, reinforcing our confidence in their representativeness. The richness of the sources available, discussed below, opens a focused window onto the range of factors and experiences illuminated by Barker.

Finally, Stana Nenadic has explored the “social shaping” of women’s experience of business in the nineteenth-century, specifically in dressmaking. Once more, this is relevant to the Wilkinsons, who were effectively a female headed family attempting to carve out interrelated family and business strategies, including in dress and bonnet making. Against the classic trope of the ambitious, growth-oriented male entrepreneurs, Nenadic argues that female business owners, operating within a “framework of constraint”, were more oriented toward maintenance and stability.^{xiii}

These, then, are the factors and intersections on which this paper is focused: respectability, status, family, and business, none of them operating independent of the others.

Sources

This paper uses letters exchanged by members of the Wilkinson family over several decades. The exchanges are between parents and children and between siblings. Central to the collection are the letters between Elizabeth Shaw (née Wilkinson) and her mother, Elizabeth Sr. Elizabeth had moved from Lancashire to Wolverhampton on marrying hardware factor John Shaw in 1813.^{xiii} As ego documents “in which the researcher is faced with an ‘I,’” these letters are rooted within a rich web of relations.^{xiv} If they do not provide access to an authentic self, they do provide significant access to the structure and content of one set of social relations, making them well suited to a study of social status as a relational experience and of social mobility as a relational process. Further, the letters actively

work to shape subjectivities and understandings, reach judgments, make decisions, maintain relationships and reaffirm bonds, helping us to move away from a view of social class as structural phenomenon within which individuals have little agency. Seeking to explore the subjective, experiential dimensions of social status, I quote extensively from the letters, providing a thick account of events, allowing for an exploration of “the historically contingent conception and experience of class, occupation, education, and mobility.”^{xv}

The Wilkinsons in Life and Business

This section presents a group portrait of the Wilkinsons, focused on the nuclear family of Thomas and Elizabeth and their seven children who survived into adulthood: Richard (b.1783); John (b.1785); Elizabeth (b.1788); Thomas (b.1790); Margaret (b.1791); William (b.1793); and Sarah (b.1797). I refer to the parents, Thomas and Elizabeth, with the suffix ‘Sr.’ and their children of the same names without suffix.^{xvi}

Like most families, the Wilkinsons experienced both happiness and sorrow, mundanity and upheaval, as the seven siblings moved from childhood to adulthood in the early decades of the nineteenth-century. The letters of the juvenile Wilkinson siblings were full of gossip about courtship and marriage. Richard, the eldest, was the first to marry, in 1807. After a pause of five years most of his siblings followed in quick succession: Thomas in 1812; Elizabeth in 1813; Margaret in 1814; and both John and William in 1815. All was not unalloyed happiness: 1816 brought the death of Thomas’ first wife and 1818 the death of Margaret, leaving behind a husband and two young children. More happily, Thomas remarried in 1818. At the same time, members of the family showed social aspiration. Richard and then John moved to London in order to advance their business careers, Richard being placed with a London banking house. Meanwhile, the other brothers took up their own business opportunities in Lancashire.

In the early 1820s, the family entered a darker, more disordered period. Richard died in 1823, leaving behind a wife and two young daughters. In the same year Sarah suffered the shame of being abandoned, pregnant, at the altar. By 1823 there were also signs that John was slipping into alcoholism, a battle that was to continue over the next five years. 1828 brought further calamities, with Sarah, now married, miscarrying twins. These tumultuous times were brought to a close with the deaths of John in 1829, of Elizabeth Sr. in 1831, and of both Thomas Sr. and Sarah in 1832. By this point, the family unit had effectively ceased to exist.^{xvii} Casting a shadow over all was the prolonged mental illness suffered by Thomas Sr. from 1818 (in which year Margaret had died), from which date forward much of his life was spent sequestered in an asylum far from home.

Interwoven with these sorrows were a series of business developments, alterations, setbacks, and failures. Like the personal traumas, these too seemed to gather pace, as though the two were marching in step. The first of these business upheavals – the dissolution of a partnership between William and his father, precipitated by William’s marriage that same year – occurred in 1815.^{viii} In 1822 Richard was declared bankrupt, forcing his return to Lancashire. At the same time, John and William were arguing about family money. These disputes did not prevent them from entering into business together in 1823, but this was never a harmonious partnership and there were regular, often vicious and sometimes public quarrels. Eventually, the two brothers parted ways as business partners in 1826. In the meantime, there were frequent attempts to find viable formal partnerships for the brothers, as well as to patch together petty enterprises that might help support the women of the family. Throughout this period, the original family ironmongers in Rochdale acted as an enduring spine around which all else was organized.

The social world inhabited by the Wilkinsons was Methodist and middling, though marked by considerable sociability. The young siblings mixed with ease amongst a wide range of friends and extended family members, including across gender lines. They met or corresponded frequently, sharing news and gossip, and travelled often and widely across Northern England. They were educated, boys and girls, often in boarding schools away from home. They read novels. They spoke openly of emotions and formed their own love matches, occasionally flouting norms and conventions. In 1813 Elizabeth reported that her friend Miss Chafer had refused to say “obey” at her marriage and teased her own fiancé that she might do the same at their forthcoming wedding.^{ix}

These were the contours of the Wilkinsons’ lives in the early nineteenth-century. It is hard to imagine that they did not feel that their social status was threatened by events such as Richard’s bankruptcy, John’s alcoholism, or Sarah’s abandonment. Before exploring how they negotiated these threats, I will examine their understanding of social class.

How the Wilkinsons Understood Social Class

The Wilkinsons’ social standing was rooted in their economic status as shopkeepers, but also showed itself in other ways. Thomas Sr. and Elizabeth Sr. preached a relatively austere doctrine dominated by piety and providence, not by the acquisition of either the material goods or the social capital associated with higher classes. For example, in December 1808, Margaret related to her sister Elizabeth how “I mentioned the piano to my Father [but] he says he thinks there’s no time for music

so I said no more about it”.^{xx} Thomas Wilkinson placed little store in the kind of accomplishments that genteel young women were expected to develop. His daughters were expected to work hard, including behind the counter of the family shop, a message reinforced by their brother, Richard, who in 1803 informed Elizabeth that “It gives me great pleasure in hearing of your Industry and Assiduity in assisting your Parents by alleviating in a Small Degree their Toils and Lbours [sic]. I hope you will continue it & endeavor still more to excel in Industry, which will be the first and best qualification you can attain”.^{xxi} But beyond this conventional homily to dutiful familial service, Richard and his siblings showed a keen awareness of and appreciation for social gradations and their importance.

Their letters explore social status in terms of its content, as well as how it was best defended. They frequently discuss material possessions, but rarely as signals of status. What Bellaigue has called “character” – accomplishments, behavior, and the company one kept – meant much more to them than that category of things we think of as “goods”. We have already seen Richard both recommend industry to his sister and praise her for its practice. Such lessons were often repeated. Likewise, brother John, seconded to London in order to learn the intricacies of “Trade”, wrote home to reassure his sister that “I have not been spending my time Idly since I came up. I have been improving myself in Accounts and other branches of Learning”. In this John was very closely echoing Richard who had earlier explained how London offered “more Trade, a greater Insight into all the different Branches of Business, as such more Improvement may be made by a young Person in my situation”.^{xxii} Application and industry were important marks of character. Industry was about duty *and* self-improvement.

Equally important was one’s friends. Richard, who took his role as eldest sibling with great seriousness, reminded Elizabeth to “take good care of yourself, with regard to what kind of company you associate with, as it is the best rule of Life”.^{xxiii} Elizabeth took the lesson to heart, for Richard subsequently wrote to tell her “It gives me great pleasure to hear you are so particular in your choice of acquaintance,” before going on to praise Elizabeth’s choice of Miss Wilkinson “a young Lady (in my Ideas) equally agreeable and pleasant to both sex”.^{xxiv} And if Thomas Sr. disdained the frivolities of music making, then the siblings did see accomplishments as important to character. Speaking of a Miss Marsden, Richard told Elizabeth:

And her writing I consider very good indeed, but as a proof I here enclose one of her letters to me, in hopes that you will take notice of her, and strive to out do her in one of the noblest parts of literature ... I mean to be proficient in writing.^{xxv}

These lines on appropriate company speak to notions of the polite and the respectable. Ultimately these strictures and lessons on social status were rooted in an understanding of where they stood in relation to others. As they grew into adulthood the Wilkinson siblings made sense of their world by looking both up and down through the social strata in which they were embedded. Thus, Richard looked to Preston, larger and wealthier than their native Colne, and saw a “very pretty place, and full of genteel people”.^{xxvi} However, the corollary of this aspirational vision was an acute awareness of how they stood in relation to those who might be considered inferior. Richard, nursing his own romantic ambitions, wrote to Elizabeth from London to ask: “Is there any truth that Miss Wilkinson and W. Hargreaves are mutually en amour, I think it must be all nonsense, as I have a higher Idea of her than to think she would countenance any person in his situation”.^{xxvii} Ill-made choices and doubtful associations might pose a serious threat to social status. Romance was seen as particularly dangerous: “Let me advise you”, Richard warned Elizabeth, “not to let love to get the whip hand of you”.^{xxviii} Local society provided stark lessons on possible consequences. Richard, reported from London that “I am creditably informed that Mr Thornber’s Son ... was seen in London this week and is a Common Soldier, being obliged to leave Colne on account of improper conduct, and I am told his friends know nothing where he is”.^{xxix} The complexity of these understandings of social status were captured in a letter John wrote to Elizabeth from London describing how he and Richard had reacted on hearing rumours from Lancashire that she might be engaged to one John Laycock:

My Bror. felt so much that he came over to inform me, he appeared as he was light in his head he was so much discomposed. However, he went to talk with Lomax over it and when he told him Lomax lifted up his hands and said Good God surely it can’t be true, and what a pity if ... a Girl of your education should be cag’d to the back of a Grocery counter. He said your Education were such that you were fit for any conversation or for any company.^{xxx}

Navigating social class and standing in industrializing Lancashire was a complex process. Aspiration and social mobility rendered unstable prior social relations. It was her parents’ determination that she receive an education that had rendered Elizabeth “unfit” – that is, too good – to be “cag’d to the back of a Grocery counter”, even though many of her own family were shopkeepers and she had been raised in the expectation that she would serve behind the counter of the family’s ironmongers. This reading of the siblings’ correspondence has begun to draw out the rich complexity of their understandings of social rank at a time of great social change. The correspondence demonstrates the

extent to which these understandings of social status were never individualistic but were instead deeply relational, implanted in and worked out in the context of family and community.

Beyond the immediate context of family and community, however, there was a yet wider societal context. Crisis and instability combined with slipping definitions of social status to render social standing precarious. Barker tells the story of the dramatic rise and fall of Liverpool baker John Coleman. Coleman was seduced by the symbolic or cultural dimensions of status, relishing titles and the new social circles to which he gained admittance. But that admittance was based on his growing wealth, and when that was lost, so was his social standing.^{xxxii} The Wilkinsons were not seduced by status. They looked to character and remained within stable social orbits. Wealth does not feature in their epistolary discussions of respectability and standing. But they were not without aspiration, as demonstrated by the move of Richard and John to London and by their ambivalence about the prospect of Elizabeth marrying a grocer, someone from the world they came from and remained embedded in.^{xxxiii} Their understanding of respectability and status rested on twin pillars: character *and* economics. Threats to respectability, triggering downward social mobility, might arrive from either direction. As we shall see, there was dissipation and bankruptcy, feuds and rancorous, unsuccessful partnerships. Moreover, not only were there twin threats to respectability, but in almost all instances they interacted in complex ways.

All members of the middling sort were vulnerable, to some degree, but elements of the Wilkinsons' situation rendered them more vulnerable. They had some resources, including capital, but these were not unlimited and faced multiple claims. Moreover, there was effectively no male head of household. Barker argues that a system of gerontocracy often allowed women to assume the headship of both household and business if the male head died or was incapacitated, even in the presence of adult sons.^{xxxiiii} Elizabeth Sr. seized both roles with vigour. Nonetheless, as Nenadic has argued, women in business in the nineteenth-century always operated within a "framework of constraint", the business (and family) strategies available to them shaped by social and cultural expectations.^{xxxv} We will see this "framework of constraint" reflected in the strategies Elizabeth Sr attempted to pursue. Again, the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of social status interacted, not least as women were more vulnerable than men to reputational damage. Thus, the potential threats to the Wilkinsons' understanding of their respectability and status were multiple. Perhaps the most dramatic came from the events of September 1823.

Private pain and public spectacle

Just as the Wilkinsons understood social status in a relational context that extended beyond the immediate family, so they discovered that threats to their respectability played out before a public gallery. Though the critical events surrounding Sarah's abandonment by Parkinson largely took place in private, in tense meetings behind closed doors, the wider community were still audience and participants, akin to a Greek chorus. Initially, the family hoped that "as no one [k]new" the wedding would be "quite privey." Sadly, when brother John came through town "dressed up expecting it to be the wedding" the news broke and "ran about the town like a handbell". Suddenly, that which had been meant to be private was "so publick" and by "Sunday morning – the streets were lined with spectators expecting to see the procession – I can assure you we kept the window blinds down at Sunday forenoon when I ventur'd out to Chapel Everybody's eyes were upon me". This was a painfully public spectacle. Elizabeth Sr. tried to leverage the public nature of the events, telling Parkinson that "it was a town's talk – they said he was shuffling her" – but to little avail. At the same time, she also leaned on town gossip in an attempt to assuage the hurt, so that "I feel my mind more reconcil'd to the disappointment ... for [Parkinson's] conduct and manner of behaviour he is not worthy of a place in our family from report he hath done the same before to a young person in Manchester ... since he left Sarah he hath been with several in the town especially H Earnshaw's oldest daughter whose character is very vile".^{xxxv}

For Sarah, there was humiliation, her mother reporting that "for my own part I do not suppose he ever intends to marry her and if he doth I think Sarah will have cause to repent it as long as she lives. She hath no ardent desire to have him but to cover her shame."^{xxxvi} Moreover, she had to continue to live in and go about the same town as he, providing frequent reminders of his offence. Parkinson continued to deny paternity, implying that she had had sex with other men.^{xxxvii} In May of 1824, some nine months after the moment of crisis, Parkinson was still shunning Sarah, for he "never comes near, not even speaks to her if she meets him".^{xxxviii} Clearly Sarah felt the sting of this shame most powerfully, but it also rebounded onto other family members. Her brothers John and William were "both ... stark mad he had made such a fool of them".^{xxxix} The affair compromised the family's social standing in ways that also had practical implications. In particular, it was speculated that Sarah's widowed sister-in-law "might not like to be with Sarah and me if S had a child".^{xl} Living arrangements that both provided shelter and refuge to Sarah whilst shielding other family members from a too close association with her became an ongoing concern.^{xli} Similarly, Elizabeth Sr. faced the pressing question of how both her disgraced daughter and her widowed daughter-in-law might be provided for. Elizabeth Sr. feared destitution might await her unmarried daughter, tying a loss of respectability to the threat of downward social mobility in an economic sense.

Nonetheless, in the court of public opinion, judgment fell hardest on Parkinson. In the immediate aftermath of the abandonment, Elizabeth Sr. could report that “Every person who mentions it seems to pity her and reprobate Parkinsons conduct”.^{xiii} A month later, in October 1823, these sentiments had hardened, and Parkinson appeared to face real consequences, for “the town is all set against him and he is losing some of his best customers and people think he cannot carry on his business”.^{xiii} By the summer of 1824, Parkinson was dead, drowned in a canal. The final judgment was unsparing: “the cry of the town is that it was a judgement from God – we must leave it with him”. For Sarah there was, perhaps, relief, “as she [could] see no prospect of happiness in either seeing or marrying him”.^{xiv} The immediate crisis had been weathered. How had the family defended their respectability and social standing?

“I Had Many Conjectures What Steps I Sd Take”

Elizabeth Sr. and Sarah could draw on a degree of community acceptance in facing these events. Nonetheless, a response was still required. The first and most obvious act Sarah’s mother could take was to stand by her daughter, well aware of the fate that might await her otherwise; for “I cannot leave Colne to take Sarah with me and I cannot leave her behind destitute”.^{xv}

In developing a family strategy, Elizabeth Sr. had familial resources available to her, with three adult sons living close by, as well as a wider network of other relatives, some of them wealthier professionals. However, the family was often riven by discord. In particular, there had long been significant tension between William and his wife and the rest of the family. As we shall see, far from offering succor to their mother, John and William often acted in ways that must have further threatened the standing of the family in the eyes of the community and, simultaneously, damaged their business prospects. In this context, Elizabeth, though now living in Wolverhampton became a valuable and trusted confidant. She and her mother regularly exchanged letters and Elizabeth returned to Lancashire often, despite the demands placed on her by her own growing family and the gathering success of her husband’s business. This correspondence depicts a deeply-loving and candid relationship, one to sustained them both.^{xvi}

The tensions with William were long standing. As early as 1815, Elizabeth’s father relayed how newly married William was “quite taken up with his wife, a famous domestick [sic] I will assure you ... he thinks none like” her.^{xvii} Elizabeth was unequivocal in her conclusion: “by no means would I advise you let them live under the same roof with you – it would be a constant cause of disturbance to all parties”.^{xviii} Her words were prophetic. As the years passed, William was close to the center of almost every family dispute. In 1822, for example, Elizabeth Sr. related how he was “very unkind –

says I am a town's talk ... and sometimes uses language not becoming a child to a parent".^{xix} But, she went on, "Sarah is nothing better. I am ready to conclude they [the other children] make bullets and set Wm to shoot them."ⁱ It is clear that expectations of familial relations had been burst and sundered - perhaps none more profoundly than that between a parent and the child who rebukes and slanders.

Spring 1823 brought Richard's death and what must have seemed like a nadir in family relations. In a poignant phrase Elizabeth Sr. feared Richard's "death was no more than an arrow that passeth through air to some of the family. I was sorry to find so little love to a Bro^r - a mercenary mind can never be satisfied". The same letter also recounted how William's wife "hath entirely given up the business ... but we never speak to each other since the day she sent word by one of the chilⁿ if I came there she wd put me out of the shop - this is much like rendering evil for a good but no more of this'.ⁱⁱ Despite the blithe attempt to dismiss the subject, it is not difficult to imagine the emotional pain experienced by a mother who sees one son go un-mourned by his brothers at the same time as she is violently rejected by the wife of another.ⁱⁱⁱ

By May 1824, John and William were in business together. Their prospects seemed good for "they have the run of the town for business and can retⁿ £200 per week". Except that "they never agree he [John] goes among his old companions and gets drunk nearly every day - they wd do very well if he wd keep sober."ⁱⁱⁱ However, John's growing alcoholism was not the only cause of friction. In a previous letter, Elizabeth senior had explained that since "Tuesday 14 of this month John and William is together [in business] but we none of us go there except for shop goods. She [William's wife] still keeps her authority".^{iv} The relationship between William and John only worsened.^{iv} In summer 1824 the brothers were not only trading together but also lodging together, a situation John found "uncomfortable". John and his mother had drawn up an agreement that would put "the house more at his own command". The reaction was perhaps predictable: the agreement "gave a general offence to all that part. Wm's wife raged very much and Wm came down to our house and told me I want^d to come to the shop and turn them out". The situation was only defused when John moved out. At least John, his mother reported, "hath been very steady and kept sober - he wishes to overcome that evil habit".^{vi}

In her next extant letter Elizabeth Sr. returned to the same events, this time describing William's wife as "like a wm out of Bedlem". This letter laid bare the heart of the dispute. William's wife "hath been puff'd up in thinking they have more private property than John but Thos told them to the contrary". "I suppose," she pondered, "Wm th^t he cd will what was not in his possession".^{lvii} The disputes between John and William reached a crisis, and a resolution, in the summer of 1826. I quote at length from a letter Elizabeth Sr. wrote to her daughter Elizabeth on July 14th of that year, for it paints a vivid

picture of how disharmonious family emotions were inseparable from disharmonious family business arrangements. The passage began by alluding to the emotional suffering the events might cause:

I wd not write till the storm was blown over as it might pain your mind and fill you full of anxiety to know the events - this afternoon the business has been settled between Wm and John. John was much to blame in getting too much liquor while Wm was gone to L'pool and he turn'd John out of the shop into the street took what money he had in his pocket and threw his hat after him ... in consequence of that Jn took to drinking and was 8 or 10 days at the Public House and when I got him home ... I thought for want of meat and sleep ... he wd have lost his reason if not his life. I had to nurse him attentively as a wm in confinement ... Since I saw you I have had many a storm but they get blown over till the next succeeds them but I shall soon have done with all.^{lxiii}

Just three years after the public spectacle of Sarah's abandonment the brothers were all but fighting in the street, while John was frequently seen drunk in the town's public houses. May 1829 brought these events to a pitiable end, with John bidding a "final adieu after a severe affliction that he bore with Christian patience".^{lxix}

It is unsurprising that Elizabeth Sr. often felt at a loss as to the way forward for her family. Her strongest instinct was to attempt to shore up economic prospects and business enterprises. She looked to the future too and tried to plan for her fatherless grandchildren. Broadly, Elizabeth Sr. had two strategies. The first was to support male family members in their formal business enterprises. The second was to search for ways in which female members could contribute to the household economy through petty or informal business activities. These strategies were highly gendered. The male siblings were much more likely to be involved in formally established partnerships, whether with each other, with their father, or with non-family members. This necessitated recruitment of relatively large sums of capital. When John was contemplating entering business in 1822, his uncle William Shaw, an attorney, offered a loan of £300 on the condition that John's "friends would come forward and lend him as much more". John's brother agreed to loan a sum of £100 "if I [their mother] would let him have two on interest. I considered if I did not I should have him to keep as such I agreed to let him [have] 200 of the old stock". Elizabeth Sr. further supported these male ventures by offering advice. In the same letter, she recounted how a Henry Anton had been assisting William in his own shop. Anton, it seemed:

[w]ould be glad to be partner with him but he hath no money - it is gone in the Colne business. He hath been very wild ... as such I have forbidden Wm having anything to do with him as a partner ... he hath agreed.^{lx}

This greater formality of business activity, and the attendant higher levels of capitalization, allowed for more substantive enterprises of the kind likely to be found in the pages of trade directories. But it also entailed greater risk. Richard, John, and Thomas all found themselves struggling to pay creditors at one time or another, committed to leases, or with working capital tied up in stock. Considerable family resources, material and emotional, were devoted to helping the brothers at these times. When, in 1828, John found himself in trouble, his mother reported “I have not any objection for it to be pd out of your Fathers property”, adding, for good measure, “Your uncle John and your uncle Wm Shaw think it unnecessary but I pay no attention to their opinion”.^{lxi} As they rallied resources to help buttress the struggling male business Elizabeth Sr. and her daughter also offered moral succor. Thus, when Thomas had trouble meeting debts in 1828, Elizabeth hoped “he will not mind that the pleasure upon doing what is right will overbalance” any attendant pain.^{lxii} Commercial probity was vital to Elizabeth’s sense of principle, as well as to maintaining a good reputation among neighbours. Female support of male businesses took the form of real resources, advice, and emotional resolve. It aimed at maintaining or restoring what was seen as the proper form of male business, the formally constituted enterprise, a marker of position in the local community.

It was different for female members of the family. When Richard died, he left a wife, 34-year-old Ann, and two daughters, Elizabeth (b.1808) and Margaret (b.1809). Elizabeth Sr. applied herself to confronting the situation, developing the second strand of her strategy:

I have thought much respecting Mrs W’s [Richard’s widow] future welfare. I have no doubt of her getting plenty of work in the dressmaking line if she can bear the confinement. She may be here as long as she likes - [I] shall not charge her anything for board till she will be able to pay for it. I propose to keep the chilⁿ till they can do for themselves. I have had some thoughts as you have had of a small shop.

This short sentence - “I have had some thoughts ... of a small shop” - speaks to so much: of what was in Elizabeth Sr.’s domain, experience, and expertise and of the options open to a woman. The scheme also looked forward: “I doubt not she wd have plenty of work for herself and chilⁿ when they have finish’d their schooling.” Elizabeth senior thus proposed to offer shelter and sustenance, childcare, the possibility of a trade, and help in securing a property. Tellingly, the “thoughts ... of a small shop” that mother and daughter had shared had also been “mentioned to John” but John had “made no reply”: this was women’s work.^{lxiii}

These schemes pre-occupied Elizabeth senior throughout the rest of the year, even as they were complicated by Sarah's situation:

I cannot tell how to advise Mrs. W. as I fear under the present circumstances it might not be agreeable but I had propos'd after Christmas getting a person into the house to instruct the children and us for the bonnet and dressmaking and at May Day going to our shop in Windebank to make and sell such things as wd take there.^{lxv}

Even as these events threatened not only incomes (the annuity Richard had left his wife being almost completely consumed by creditors) but also the respectability of the whole family, its emotional health as well as its commercial legitimacy, Elizabeth Sr. was not willing to abandon either her daughter or her bereft daughter-in-law and she continued to dwell on plans that might reconcile these conflicting dilemmas:

[if] Mrs. W shd go back to London for instruction in the dress-making I should have no occasion [to get a servant] into the house - I thought she might not like to be with Sarah and me if S had a child and have thought [that] if [we] have two parts of the house in Windebank she [Mrs. W] might have half the shop and the parlour end to carry on dressmaking and sell some drapery or millinery goods and so take the other part of the shop for grocery and kitchen for ourselves.

'But,' she concluded "I have so many conjectures being so much frustrated in my designs that I want a better guide than myself."^{lxv} Plans were parsed through feelings. She persisted and six months later, in May 1824 Elizabeth Sr. was contemplating how she, Sarah and her child, and Richard's widow and her daughters might all be accommodated, in terms of both working and living space.^{lxvi} By July 1824, however, the plans were faltering, for "Mrs. Rich^d hath conclud'd to return with her chilⁿ to London ... She appears quite averse to putting the chilⁿ apprentices and if they stay with me they have no employment."^{lxvii} Even so, soon a new plan had emerged, in which "I shd like to put Margaret to the Shaw[l] business - it wd settle her to work and be something to learn as [we] are just entering upon the dressmaking business."^{lxviii} Nenadic describes the "cultivation of 'dovetailed' effort whereby the income producing activities of one related woman reinforced and supplemented those of another", capturing very effectively the strategy aimed for by Elizabeth Sr.

No trace of these female Wilkinson enterprises - whether in dressmaking, bonnets, shawls, or millinery - has been found in trade directories for the town. All of these attempts may have come to

naught, despite the emotional investment made in them, or they may have simply evaded the notice of those men compiling trade directories, but still they mattered intensely.

Conclusion

This article has explored the experience of social mobility for the middling sort in early nineteenth-century England, focusing on the sources of and responses to threats to respectability and social status. The richness and vividness of the archival sources tempt us to imagine the experiences of the Wilkinsons as exceptional, their misfortunes extreme. But the threats to social status they endured, and the vulnerabilities they suffered from, were not unique. We should be careful in framing the 1820s as a period of particularly acute crisis for the Wilkinsons, and of positioning the threat of a loss of respectability and standing as unusual. Early death was a reality for all families. The middling sort were entangled in an economy deeply reliant on credit but offering only weak institutional support and protection for both creditors and debtors and frequently wracked by often highly localized financial and banking crises. The importance of credit made “character” an economic resource. Families were large and resources, particularly the financial resources to establish male children in business, were often spread thin. Of course, some families did succeed in achieving upward social mobility. It is notable that by the 1850s Elizabeth Shaw (née Wilkinson) and her husband John had risen into the ranks of the solidly middle class, enjoying a secure and comfortable life comparable to that of the Heywood and McKeand families studied by Bellaigue. In comparison, Elizabeth’s parents and siblings struggled hard to maintain their status. Did the Heywood, McKeand, and Shaw families do something “right” whilst the Wilkinsons made critical missteps? This turns us to a consideration of the family strategies available to the Wilkinsons, and to Elizabeth Sr. especially.

Sometimes the family’s emotions and behaviour ran unchecked. They experienced shame and humiliation. But they also showed aspiration and enterprise, even if they did not always meet with success, and, in many ways, the strategies they employed were little different from those used by the Heywoods, McKeands, and Shaws. Elizabeth Sr., as effective head of the household, invested her the family’s capital as she saw fit, gave business advice, and planned enterprises. She invested in her children’s education, supported them emotionally, attempted to broker reconciliations, nursed her ailing son, and stood by her daughter Sarah. She did practical and emotional work. In this she was supported by the close and loving bond with Elizabeth, her eldest daughter. It was barely enough.

If we should be wary of attempting to disentangle economic and non-economic threats and strategies, then we also should not gloss the importance of gender. Social status was a family project rooted in familial relations. The relational structure of the family was planted in a wider system of

relationships: with the community; with fellow believers; with others in adjacent social strata; with the socio-economic structure of the nation, as so ably demonstrated by Davidoff and Hall.^{lxix} All of these relational systems were gendered. This is seen clearly in the difference between the strategies enacted or envisioned for the male and female Wilkinson siblings. More than that, however, in trying to put these strategies to work, Elizabeth Sr. always had to act within what Stana Nenadic has called a “framework of constraint” comprised of many elements, from social expectations to married women’s property rights.^{lxx} Furthermore, women were also more vulnerable to reputational damage than were men. For Elizabeth Sr., maintaining her family’s reputation and social status became a near ceaseless struggle.

ⁱ Elsewhere Elizabeth says “we suspect that this great secret against Sarah hath had its origins at [illegible] as she threaten’d to expose Sarah”. Shaw MSS, Elizabeth Wilkinson to Elizabeth Shaw (née Wilkinson), 11th October 1823. This may be a reference to William Wilkinson’s wife, Sarah’s sister-in-law.

ⁱⁱ All quotations in the introduction come from Shaw MSS, EW to ES, 23rd September 1823. A subsequent letter reported that Parkinson “promised to come again and if he did not marry her he wd tell her his objection ... but he never came according to his word of which there is no dependence”. Shaw MSS, EW to ES, 11th October 1823.

ⁱⁱⁱ C. de Bellaigue, H. Mills, E. Worth, “Rags to Riches?” New Histories of Social Mobility in Modern Britain – Introduction’, *Cultural And Social History*, 16 (2019), p. 2.

^{iv} Bellaigue et al., “Rags to Riches?” p. 7.

^v Bellaigue et al., “Rags to Riches?” p. 2.

^{vi} Bellaigue et al., “Rags to Riches?” p. 3.

^{vii} Bellaigue et al., “Rags to Riches?” p. 13.

^{viii} C. de Bellaigue, ‘Great Expectations? Childhood, Family, and Middle-Class Social Mobility in Nineteenth-Century England’, *Cultural and Social History*, 16 (2019), p. 32.

^{ix} Bellaigue, ‘Great Expectations?’ p. 30

^x Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Classes* (3rd edition. London: Routledge, 2019), p. xxxiii.

^{xi} Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 193.

^{xii} Nenadic, “The Social Shaping of Business Behaviour in the Nineteenth-Century Women’s Garment Trades”, *Journal of Social History*, 31 (1998), p.631

^{xiii} A. Popp, *Entrepreneurial Families: Business, Marriage, and Life in the Early Nineteenth-Century* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), p. 54.

^{xiv} Jacques Presser, quoted in M. Mascuch, R. Dekker, A. Baggerman, ‘Egodocuments and History: A Short Account of the Longue Duree’, *The Historian*, 78 (2016), p. 11.

^{xv} Bellaigue et al., “Rags to Riches?” p. 5.

^{xvi} I am indebted to Patricia Dyson for her work in reconstructing the histories of the Shaw and Wilkinson families and for her comments on earlier versions of this article. She has helped me avoid numerous mistakes.

^{xvii} See Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 322.

^{xviii} H. Barker, *Family and Business during the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 97.

^{xix} Popp, *Entrepreneurial Families*.

^{xx} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, Margaret Wilkinson to Elizabeth Wilkinson Jnr. (EWJnr), 8th December 1808.

^{xxi} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, Richard Wilkinson (RW) to EWJnr, 11th March 1803.

^{xxii} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, John Wilkinson to EWJnr, 8th December 1808; Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, RW to EWJnr, 11th March 1803.

^{xxiii} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, RW to EWJnr, 27th August 1802. The expectation that elder siblings would mentor the younger was widespread. See Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 349.

^{xxiv} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, RW to EWJnr, 24th March 1806.

^{xxv} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, RW to EWJnr, 11th March 1803.

^{xxvi} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, RW to EWJnr, 4th June 1806.

^{xxvii} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, RW to EWJnr, 24th March 1806.

^{xxviii} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, RW to EWJnr, 11th March 1807.

^{xxxix} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, RW to EWJnr, 14th November 1803.

^{xxx} Wilkinson and Shaw MSS, JW to EWJnr, 20th August 1809.

^{xxxi} Barker, *Family and Business*, p. 5-7.

^{xxxii} Barker outlines the gradations of status among those in “trade,” with wholesalers above those in retail, and those dealing in luxury goods above those dealing in the quotidian. The Wilkinsons ran retail shops selling everyday items such as groceries and ironmongery. *Family and Business*, p. 10.

^{xxxiii} Barker, *Family and Business*, p. 102.

^{xxxiv} S. Nenadic, “Social Shaping”, p.631

^{xxxv} All quotations in this paragraph from Shaw MSS, EW to ES, 23rd September 1823.

^{xxxvi} Gibson argues that the “external imposition of ‘shaming’ does not necessarily result in the internalisation of shame, or in the individual accepting that they are defective or inferior in themselves”. It is difficult to know how to read the use of the word shame in the quoted letter. Was this a reference to an internalized sense of shame, or a recognition that Sarah found herself in a position viewed by society as shameful? That marriage, a public act, might “cover her shame” suggests the latter. K. Gibson, “‘I Am Not on the Footing of Kept Women’: Extra- Marital Love in Eighteenth-Century England”, *Cultural and Social History*, 16 (2019)

^{xxxvii} Of Sarah’s pregnancy, Parkinson was reported to have said “he could not believe it if all the people in the town told him so from anything that had passed betwixt them.”

^{xxxviii} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, 21st May 1824.

^{xxxix} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, 23rd September 1823

^{xl} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, 11th October 1823.

^{xli} Gibson quotes E.B., an anonymous pregnant woman in an adulterous relationship, to similar effect: “The people stare at my big belly and always ask where my husband is. I tell them he is forced to be in the country on business, I fear we shall find some difficulty in getting a lodging as they all seem very unwilling to take us in not knowing what to make of us”. Gibson, “‘I Am Not on the Footing of Kept Women’”, p. 12.

^{xlii} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, 23rd September 1823.

^{xliiii} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, 11th October 1823.

^{xliv} As the literature on breach of promise and seduction suits demonstrates, juries (and presumably the communities from which they were drawn) were often sympathetic towards the women involved and critical of men. Sarah’s story is in many ways typical, for the “women involved were most often of the lower middling sorts, groups that allowed women greater choice of partner and ‘alone time’ with future spouses” (Sarah’s older sister, Elizabeth, spent time alone with her fiancé during their courtship between 1810-11). Barclay notes that some women “may have viewed sex before marriage as a normative courtship custom” but we do not know if that was true of Sarah. The profile of women in such suits began to change in the nineteenth-century, becoming more “polite”, more affluent, less worldly, more easily positioned as “wronged” and juries became less sympathetic towards men. Sarah’s case occurred during this period of transition. In one respect Sarah’s case stands out: the absence of her father. Barclay argues, the “emotional context was heightened by the expectation that fathers, in particular, were wronged through the seduction ... of their daughters”. It is not known if her father’s absence shaped public opinion. Did her lack of paternal protection render her more sympathetic? No evidence has been found that either a breach of promise or seduction case was brought against Parkinson, who was in any case dead less than a year after the events of September 1823. Such cases were typically brought by fathers on behalf of daughters, but Sarah lacked such a male advocate. K. Barclay, “Emotions, the Law and the Press in Britain: Seduction and Breach of Promise Suits, 1780-1830”, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39 (2016), p. 270 & p. 273.

^{xlv} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, 23rd September 1823.

^{xlvi} Barkers notes that many families contained members who worked at maintaining unity, particularly during disputes. Elizabeth Sr. and Jr. undoubtedly burdened that role together in the Wilkinson family. *Family and Business*, p. 81.

^{xlvii} Shaw MSS, Thomas Wilkinson (TW) to ES, 15th December 1815.

^{xlviii} Shaw MSS, ES to EW, 1st July 1815. Barker explores how tensions could centre on physical living spaces. *Family and Business*, p. 14.

^{xlix} Why Elizabeth Sr. might be the subject of gossip is not revealed.

ⁱ Shaw MSS, EW to ES, January 24th, 1822.

ⁱⁱ Shaw MSS, EW to ES, March 28th, 1823.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barker argues that families did not always act “in ways that were necessarily rational or cordial, but it was the case that ideals about family relationships strongly influenced decision-making”. *Family and Business*, p. 79. Ideals of around family relationships were clearly frayed among the Wilkinsons.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Shaw MSS, EW to ES, May 21st, 1824.

^v Shaw MSS, EW to ES, 11th October 1823.

^{vi} If brother and other family partnerships were common, so were disputes surrounding them. See Barker, *Family and Business*, p. 97 and 100-1.

^{vii} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, July 16th, 1824.

-
- ^{lvi} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, August 12th, 1824. Unsurprisingly, jealousy among in-laws was not uncommon. See Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 350.
- ^{lvii} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, July 14th, 1826.
- ^{lviii} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, May 30th, 1829.
- ^{lix} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, November 19th, 1822.
- ^{lxi} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, March 24th, 1828.
- ^{lxii} Shaw MSS, ES to EW, June 14th, 1828.
- ^{lxiii} Shaw MSS, EW to EW, March 28th, 1823.
- ^{lxiv} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, September 23rd, 1823.
- ^{lxv} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, October 11th, 1823. Women's work was hidden from public view in similar ways. See Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 287.
- ^{lxvi} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, May 24th, 1824. The Wilkinsons were not alone in suffering divisive in-laws. John Coleman claimed that "Our happiness seemed complete and would have continued so in our respective families had not the baneful disposition of a brother-in-law, by his turbulent spirit, sown the seeds of discontent in our family". Barker, *Family and Business*, p. 116.
- ^{lxvii} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, July 16th, 1824.
- ^{lxviii} Shaw MSS, EW to ES, August 12th, 1824.
- ^{lxix} Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*.
- ^{lxx} Nenadic, "Social Shaping", p. 631