Marie Jue had been married three years when her husband died in 1741, leaving her with three of her own children and three stepdaughters to support. This daunting task might have dismayed any widow, but Marie Jue had the resources of a brisk business that she had carried on with her husband, Nicolas, as well as her own vigor and business sense. From their shop in Caen and their booth at the Fair of Guibray, they had worked together selling Parisian luxury goods to wealthy consumers in Normandy. Already on the eve of her husband's funeral, at a sale of household objects and merchandise to pay his creditors, Mme Jue revealed her astute eye and firm character. Among the items sold, she declared, were some that belonged to her personally, from her own lodging and dedicated to her use by her marriage contract. She did not want the objects back but asked for their monetary compensation, no doubt thinking that ready cash was more helpful at that moment than fireplace tools or chairs, no matter what their sentimental value.¹

Joseph Berquet, a merchant in Caen and court-appointed fiscal guardian of the minor children of Nicolas' first marriage, arranged the sale at which gold and silver rings and other items were priced. Hoping to satisfy all of the creditors, he offered some indemnity to compensate those who did not hear of the sale or thought it too inconvenient to attend. The widow must have found it sobering to see her husband's jewelry taken away along with stock she might have used to maintain the business. If the

¹ Archives départementales de Calvados [hereafter ADC] 2E 3361 (B) Certificate drawn up and signed 29 May 1741.
list of associates demanding payment aroused her dismay, however, that same list provided the basis for future trade. Widow Jue had the register containing the names of merchants, memoranda, and bills of sale on which to base her new activities.²

She soon reestablished the network of tradesmen and factors that let her continue purveying luxury goods to an appreciative Norman clientele around Caen. Through letters, advertisements, bills of sale, and legal documents, we can reconstruct a pattern of provincial trade with Paris that illustrates an early market economy. Widow Jue was part of a web of merchants linking provincial markets with specialized urban craftsmen. Instead of approaching these artisans directly, the merchants dealt with intermediaries who conveyed the orders to the artisans and arranged for the goods to be delivered to outlying destinations. The go-betweens managed the finances and certified the quality of the products. Although these shrewd persons were indispensable to commerce, they have not received the systematic study they deserve. They played a crucial role in a transitional age when bespoke products and ready-made goods were both commercially viable, and techniques were not standardized. By examining Widow Jue's trade we may begin to learn the effects that the interaction of commercial factors and merchants had on the volume, aesthetics, and pricing of products in the preindustrial age.

Even a cursory look at the inventories after death of moneyed Normans indicates how wealthy the province was. Grown rich from the sale of milk, butter, cider, and grain, farmers were a reliable market for fashionable clothing and household decoration. Whether they wore the garments only on Sundays or welcomed guests frequently to show off their beautiful belongings, this group spent money to let their

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² ADC 2E 3361 (B) Document of 2 Mar. 1741, certified by Jean Leigne, lieutenant royal of Caen.
prosperity show. Provincial nobles were another source of sales, along with judicial (robe) nobles in Caen and Rouen. Finally, with shops in town and outreach to the hamlets where cotton was spun into thread and linen prepared, the growing merchant class had the funds to buy a touch of elegance for their households.

But before consumers purchased the goods, they had to be brought from Paris and paid for. Widow Jue bore the expense of moving goods in carriages for the four and a half days it took from Paris. The strain on her funds also came from the fact that some money was entailed to her stepdaughters. In addition, her late husband had given up the dispute over inheritance pressed by the noble part of the family, admitting he did not have the resources or time to pursue his claim. In these circumstances, Jue based her commerce on funds borrowed from notaries and used a complex system of letters of credit to satisfy outstanding business debts. The monies she dealt with varied from sixteen livres two sous for one object to seven hundred livres for a large shipment.

What was the intimate quality of business like for a merchant dealing in essential "nonessentials"? Mme Jue's correspondence with intermediaries reveals some of its details. Widow Jue would place an order with a Paris agent for a certain number and quality of items and indicate how much they should cost. She dealt frequently with Monsieur Lenfant the elder, who discussed size, cost, and transportation problems in his correspondence. This merchant dealt with dozens of other agents who had access to a variety and quantity of products that one master artisan was unlikely to have in stock. The complex system of wholesale suppliers duplicated the intricate subcontracting that Michael Sonenscher has documented for

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4 Carolyn Sargentson has detailed the variety of credit instruments that merchants used in *Merchants and Luxury Markets: The Marchands Merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996), 18-44.
Paris. Descriptions of products, comments on what was in fashion, evaluation of price, difficulties in finding transportation, judgments on the honesty of other merchants, and personal greetings were common themes in the correspondence between the Widow Jue and her Parisian supplier.

When Mme Jue started the business in her own name, mirrors formed a large part of her merchandise, and M Lenfant procured for her a shipment of mirrors costing seven hundred livres. Rebutting Jue's complaint that they were overpriced, he wrote that he had been forced to wait three months for them and that they were priced at the going rate. Moreover, her late husband had stocked them at the same price. If Jue had found cheaper mirrors, apparently they could no longer be obtained. To soften his comment, he wrote, "If you have need of a pretty japanned dressing table in any color I will give it to you at a better price than you have paid." As Jue continued to complain about the price, Lenfant assured her that he made little profit on the mirrors he shipped and that the craftsman he dealt with had been a reliable businessman for twenty-five or thirty years.

Lenfant's letters to Mme Jue mixed prices with business advice and salutations. Prefacing a demand for repayment of an account that her husband had run up, amounting to 752 livres, 2 sous, Lenfant wrote, "I profit by the new year to have the honor to send you good wishes . . . and faithful benedictions for your dear family." About other merchandise, he wrote that he was offering her alone a different price to give her a successful sale.

Money was not the only point of contention between the widow and her supplier. Mme Jue sent very precise specifications for the Parisian artisans to fulfill. As Giorgio Riello has demonstrated for the shoe industry, merchants in the

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6 ADC 2E 3362 (A), Letter from Lenfant, Paris, 30 Nov. 1743.

7 Ibid., Letter from Lenfant, Paris, 26 Jan. 1745.

preindustrial age dealt with individual orders as well as readymade products bought on speculation. Thus one mirror required a border twenty by sixteen inches, while another was to be in yellow, with dimensions of eighteen by fourteen. The back was to be as well crafted as the front border, gilded and in black.

Mirrors were not the only product stocking the widow's inventory. The proprietor of Regnère and Company sent her a packet containing three pairs of similar earrings in what Jue called a novelty style, with the warning that this model was not currently considered new in Paris. The goods came with a bill for seventy-five livres seventeen sous and the warning that a merchant named Boete at his English market "is a charlatan who sells at every sort of price, though we dealt with him last time getting a low price, the best of the bargain." A more difficult transaction occurred with three ornaments of mother of pearl and another six that Widow Jue later ordered. She complained, again, that they were too expensive but, in addition, that the second batch did not resemble those in the first order. At this her opposite number, M Darche, protested vehemently: "As for the customer who ordered two pairs of gold earrings, it is not my fault Madame because it is the same model and the same design and the same lapidary worker who cut the stone and the same worker who mounted it."

He continued, berating the widow and accusing her of bad faith while he justified the price and workmanship: "You say that the pairs of earrings are too expensive, well let connoisseurs take a look at them and you will see that they are worth the price." As the letter continued, he protested his honesty: "You have

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ADC 2E 3362 (A), Letter from Lenfant, Paris, 29 Dec. 1744.


Ibid., Letter from Darche, Paris, 9 Oct. 1746. A transcription of the original gives an even better sense of the prose: "qu’un esse ma faute madame puis qu’il son du mesme model et du mesme deseine et le mesme lapidaire qua taille le pierre et le meme ouvrier quil les a monte. . . ."
mortified me seriously, seeing that I did everything in my power for you . . . even sending the merchandise on time. . . . I work in good faith with you as well as another, and you are the first who has scolded me." Jue proposed his lowering the price he had asked, and his response echoed the words of every workingman: "I beg you to understand that I do not earn eleven livres ten sous so easily." He insisted on receiving a letter of change worth 151 livres 10 sous. His formulary closing words, in this case, sound very incongruous: "permit me to remain with a deep submissiveness, Madame, your very humble and obedient servant, Darche."

Despite the hard words exchanged, Darche continued to be one of Jue's suppliers, but his personality remained irritable. She requested a shoe buckle to be delivered by M Chabrot. However, "that's impossible" (cela nest se peut) because M Chabrot had already left the eleventh of May for Caen, and besides Darche did not have another like the one she ordered. The entire misunderstanding, Darche insisted is your fault because I asked you to place your order as soon as possible, when you needed it . . . You do not take the trouble to read my letters when you reproach me for causing you expense. . . . You complained that the small buckle is too expensive and that you have had a similar one for seven livres. . . . I send you merchandise at all prices, and I am surprised that you do not distinguish between buckles that are cut (afilés) on the outside from those that are not.

He ended the letter wishing her good health and prosperous sales, regretting that she did not have the buckle she wanted and saying once again that it was not his fault.  

As we see from Darche's letter, despite the close connections between Paris and Normandy, the transport of merchandise was still problematic. Parisian factors tried to add their orders to those of other merchants going to Rouen, Caen, and the other cities. One order, for example, was sent to "M. de Gaumont

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
merchant of painted scenes, on the Notre Dame Bridge, to send to you." This expedient was cheaper than the fallback of sending the goods in a package on the stagecoach or a private carriage. Paris merchants encouraged their trading partners to place orders in a timely fashion in order to coincide with the cheaper transport. They also sent letters of credit by way of traveling merchants or drew on accounts already established with other firms.\(^{15}\) It was a small world, indeed, with personal ties and trust. Widow Jue rewarded M Beaumont, who shipped the earrings to her from Regnère and Company, with a cheese that he declared to be "exquisite." As he enthused, "in Paris there are the best, but I have never eaten one as delicious, and it caused here a visit of some friends who did not leave." His postscript sent regards to her brother.\(^{16}\)

Selling mirrors, earrings, pins, rosette ornaments for vests, shoe buckles, and the occasional apron, Widow Jue was able to continue her business and to maintain her household. She was among the capable urban women who belie the stereotype of impoverished and defeated widows.\(^{17}\) Like other merchants, she played an important role in placing Parisian luxury goods in the hands of eager provincial customers. Using letters of credit, taking advantage of the close ties between Parisian intermediaries and far-flung merchants, and astutely judging

\(^{15}\) Ibid., Letter from Lenfant, Paris, 26 June 1745.


merchandise, she carried on a successful business in the towns and countryside of Normandy. She expanded to become an entrepreneur at the Fair of Guibray, which had an international clientele. Even when her son's misbehavior caused her to have him remanded to Bicêtre prison, she maintained the dignity and authority of a head of household. Respected by business associates, even when she corrected the arithmetic of one, she was an example of a successful merchant entrepreneur in the eighteenth-century age of consumer revolution.