Were guilds an economic anachronism in eighteenth-century France? Not if one looks carefully at the business activity in France's important northern city, Rouen. This guild city fairly hummed with manufactures for markets in Normandy, Lyon, the Spanish and French colonies in South America and the Caribbean, and other Atlantic ports. In this heart of traditional work associations, guilds were able to survive because, along with their old traditions, they incorporated so many traits that early capitalism brought to France. In Rouen as in Lille, the proliferation of rural spinning and weaving, which developed capitalist opportunities in the countryside, passed into the hands of guild masters who reaped added benefits from goods they certified and resold.1 The multiple lawsuits that made some guilds objects of derision appeared to concern only petty details, but they were actually life and death struggles for trade survival.

Conditions in the early modern economic climate were constantly changing. Atlantic trade offered vast new markets to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century merchants. As the tempo of commerce increased, the Lowlands and England joined Italy and Germany as trading partners and

competitors of France. French ports and major cities benefited from the triangular trade, while domestic markets increased in size and sophistication. Instead of failing, Rouen’s guilds altered their means of manufacture and trade. They used all the legal and extralegal instruments available as they reached out for economies of scale and workmanship, vertical integration, and monopolies. Masters skillfully manipulated law courts and tradition with a perfectly straight face, while at the same time they broke guild regulations to gain individual advantage. They were not so different from today's corporations that pay lip service to free trade and at the same time lobby for government subsidies that they willingly accept.

Any examination of guilds in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries belies the accepted notion, put forth even by as seasoned an economist as Jean-Yves Grenier, that guilds were made obsolete by the growth of Atlantic trade because they lacked information about fast-changing, wholesale, overseas markets. The sensitivity needed to thrive in this bruising world of commerce required product novelties, and it rewarded those who sold at the best price. For this market, heads of workshops paid attention not only to quality as with medieval guilds but also to the price of the constituent parts of a product. Precociously, they realized that control over all aspects of the business could net economies and they strove to put this into effect.

Their behavior is a clear indication that expanding their reach over raw materials, workers, and markets was a primary goal. Without articulating it as a new idea, guilds sought to develop vertical control over their industries. They stretched their authority over all the techniques

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associated with their products, claiming that they alone had legal access to tall looms, short looms, and all sorts of other devices. Moreover, they bent every effort to extend exclusive rights over new items that caught consumers' favor and then tried to monopolize whatever instruments the novelty products required. As for labor, numerous guilds legally or illegally employed non-guild workers in the countryside while simultaneously insisting that ateliers in the town use only guild-licensed or approved craft makers. Steven Kaplan and Michael Sonenscher have shown that guilds regularly used segmentation of labor and outsourcing as normal business practices. Employing "capitalist methods" avant la lettre, guilds applied to handicraft the efficiency and flexibility that would later be singled out as newly conceived means devised by the modern Industrial Revolution.

As an example of these activities, I have chosen several women's guilds in Rouen that existed from the Middle Ages until the suppression of guilds in 1791. I want to emphasize that these needlework guilds followed practices that were common to all guilds. This paper will discuss the linen-drappers of new cloth and the knitters, both all-female guilds. The lingères en neuf (linen drapers of new cloth), one of the ten guilds with completely or extensive female membership, constituted the most important all-female guild in Rouen. It paid an annual capitation d'industrie tax of 1,120 livres in 1750. Reputed to have had 300 mistresses at one time, its membership totaled 103 mistresses in 1757 and 217 in 1775. To set these institutions into context, we note that they were one of the ten guilds with female

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masters within the city's total of some 112 guilds. Females who had acquired the mastership in their own right numbered about 700 women in 1775, approximately ten percent of the guild masters in Rouen.\textsuperscript{4}

As in all the women's guilds, the linen drapers' structure followed the classic model of masters, journey workers, and apprentices. The mistress draper had to show that she was actively engaged in the trade, with an open workshop (\textit{boutique ouverte}). To be permitted to establish an open workshop, the draper had to be twenty years old or married. With these conditions met, each mistress was allowed one apprentice, at least twelve years old, who spent three years in training and another three as a journeywoman.

Unlike the female guilds in Paris, Rouen's women's guilds chose officers from among their own ranks. The ten guild officers, elected by public assembly of all the master linen drapers, were charged with the duty of making four tours of inspection to check that all guild workshops were run according to statutes. Their activities centered in the Cloth Hall, where they bought goods from merchants coming from outside the city, carried on the election of their officers, held their general convocations, and shared out and cut the pieces of linen they bought.\textsuperscript{5}

These women had the responsibility not only to manage their businesses, but to work in them as well. Before a

\textsuperscript{4} Archives de la Seine Maritime [hereafter ADSM] C 360, Capitation of 1757.

\textsuperscript{5} Charles Ouin-Lacroix, \textit{Histoire des anciennes corporations d'arts et métiers et des confréries religieuses de la capitale de la Normandie} (Rouen: Leconte Frères, 1850), 684-88 reprints the 1700 statutes of the "Lingères et marchandes de toiles en gros et en détail." Changes in the guild law of 1779 ordered that an assembly of twenty-five mistresses or masters would discuss policy, rather than the earlier assembly of the whole. [no separate line] See ADSM 5 E 511 for details about drapers' practices.
draper could take up a stall in the Cloth Hall to sell garments and yard goods on Friday and Saturday, she had to have an open workshop showing that she was engaged in manufacture. Documents show that as early as 1262 the linen drapers also held space in the market at the Old Tower (Vieille Tour), a nearby building.6 A rental agreement drawn up on 2 September 1706 for seventy livres reserved a space in the Old Tower to serve as a warehouse and sales center.7

With such official consideration, the linen drapers were able to establish themselves as important makers of shirts, underclothes, handkerchiefs, bedding, and other linens. Their goal of product diversity had a long history, and the linen drapers continually expanded their range of processes and goods. A monopoly over damask linen and cotton for table linen from the fifteenth century on added to their prosperity.8 When the king reestablished normal commerce after a sixteenth-century plague, he gave the drapers the new right to dye linen themselves or to have it dyed by others. When cotton became popular in the eighteenth century, drapers received permission to have the cloth dyed or worked on a calender, a machine that squeezed fabric to make a moiré finish.9 By the eighteenth century these guilds

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6 ADSM 5 E 599 “Copie de la chartre du roy Saint Louis du mois de Novembre 1262.”
7 ADSM 5 E 511. The space included "the length of the vault where the traditional race on St. Roman's Day begins, up to the beam of the vault where the door of the Vieille Tour closes on the side of the fish market, but not including the pillars." The leasor pledged to replace "the beams in the sides of the stalls, and leasees to take care that the beams on the other side are maintained in good condition, and to keep the area as clean as possible."
8 Ouin-Lacroix, 122.
9 ADSM 5 E 508, Court case, 12 Aug. 1753, Marchands Merciers Drapiers appealing the sentence of 3 Feb. 1753.
mistresses had "the right to sell and have manufactured all sorts of products made of linen cloth, in every color, and to decorate the products with all sorts of linen thread, to the exclusion of all other crafts." This put Rouen's drapers of new linen in charge of the confection and coloring of goods that were the first purchases of families with comfortable or even small incomes. Sheets, after all, were a primary household necessity.

Besides these manufacturing monopolies, significant commercial privileges benefited the linen drapers. Since commerce, even more than manufacture, was the road to wealth, all guilds sought to keep the right to sell their own products and to expand their repertory of trade. These makers of sheets and fichus understood the advantages of extended commerce. Their earliest existing statutes dating to 1538 show that the drapers were already involved in the retail and wholesale trade of linen cloth. In this capacity, they frequently clashed with the weavers of linen (toilliers) a male guild that also sold linen by the yard. The women sought justification for their claims by researching their sister guild of women weavers, drapers, and sellers of linen (marchandes, maîtresses toilières, et lingères) in Paris, judging from the 1645 copy of the Paris by-laws found among the Rouen linen drapers' papers.

In order to avoid problems and legal entanglements, the Rouen authorities tried unsuccessfully to relegate their women drapers to retail trade and the male weavers to wholesale commerce. The drapers, however, managed to regain their right to both retail and wholesale trade of linen by dint of lawsuits. Finally, conflicts led the Parlement of Normandy to make the unusual ruling in 1664 that each guild was required to invite the other to sit in on its

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10 Ouin-Lacroix, 685.
deliberations on pain of a 200 livres fine. But as one would expect, that stricture did not last; by 1700 the women were officially calling themselves "drapers and wholesale and retail merchants of linen goods" (Lingères et marchandes de toiles en gros et en détail). By 1775, the women's reach had extended to the acquisition and resale of foreign goods, and their title became "Merchants of all sorts of linen goods, French as well as foreign, in wholesale and in retail, and Mistress linen drapers of the city and outskirts of Rouen" (Marchandes de toutes sortes de toiles, tant Françaises qu'étrangères, en gros et en détail, et Maitresses Lingères en la ville, faubourgs, et banlieu de Rouen).\textsuperscript{11} In addition, the drapers received a monopoly on the retail and wholesale trade in cotton in all sizes, whether decorated or plain, dyed or natural, foreign or domestic.

In 1675, the drapers made an object lesson of a male linen weaver named Bigault and his sister, whose array of goods included squares of linen, cotton, muslin, and ticking that were bleached and unbleached or partially sized and finished. The drapers' seized these goods, and the women's action was validated when they won their suit. From this case grew the specific regulation that master weavers could not sell cloth they did not weave, and to prove it, they had to weave their initials into the fabric. The weavers could sell their own linen goods, wholesale or retail, at the Cloth Hall, in their shops, or in their workshops, but they were specifically forbidden to buy cloth either wholesale or retail for resale.\textsuperscript{12} With the weavers' competition choked off, the drapers continued to expand wholesale opportunities when they won the exclusive privilege of dealing in large,

\textsuperscript{11} Archives Nationales [hereafter AN] F 12 751.
\textsuperscript{12} ADSM 5 E 599, "Arrêt de la cour de parlement de Rouen, servant de règlement entre les marchandes lingères et tisserans en toile du 17 Novembre 1686," 8-11.
industrial-size balls of cotton thread. This time it was the spinners who lost, having to enter the lucrative eighteenth-century cotton trade only with small, retail-size balls of thread.

Moreover, guilds kept up a constant pressure to extend their range of manufacturing, producing new items and using diverse materials. Michael Sonenscher asserts that the guilds assigned different titles for various workers in order to make it appear that very similar work processes were really distinct, thus capturing their exclusive techniques for a whole gamut of tasks, but my research shows the opposite dynamic.\footnote{This applied equally to journeymen's organizations (companonnages) according to Sonenscher, \textit{Work and Wages}, 323. See also idem., "Mythical Work: Workshop Production and the Compagnonnages of Eighteenth-Century France," in \textit{The Historical Meanings of Work}, ed. Patrick Joyce (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 31-32 and, in the same volume, John Rule, "The Property of Skill in the Period of Manufacture," 108.} Guilds were constantly trying to amalgamate other guilds to co-opt competitors or to extend their own commercial success. They aimed at gaining control of all the techniques and instruments associated with their products, and they also tried to extend their ability to work with more and more different materials. The drapers' success in these areas enabled them to expand their clothing production much farther than the shirts, trimmings, and undergarments they traditionally made. A court decree in 31 January 1665 confirmed the drapers' use of woolen goods priced at thirty sous or less for linings of cloaks, hats, jerkins, jackets, and vests (\textit{manteaux, casques et juste au corps}). On the same day they received permission to make and sell all sorts of clothes, as long as they used material that cost thirty sous or less per yard.\footnote{ADSM 5 E 714.} It appeared...
that the drapers positioned themselves not only to dominate the wholesale linen market, but also to enter the readymade and bespoke clothing industries. It was understood that the draper mistresses would hire others for the actual confection of the garments, whether the workers were apprentices, household domestics, or sweatshop workers.

Through these developments we can see that the linen drapers displayed the sensitivity to market change that economists have denied in their theory of guild behavior. Thanks to Daniel Roche, we know that fashion change and consumer appetite were causing a consumer revolution in eighteenth-century Paris. Rouen was part of the fashion network. In the mid-century, Rouen's female consumers began the fad of wearing shawls as head coverings. This new custom aroused considerable competition among several guilds, each issuing a lawsuit to secure the monopoly of manufacturing the popular accessory. The knitters (bonnetières), another all-female guild, insisted on their ancient right to furnish any item that would be worn on the head, ears, and necks of women. They based this exclusivity on the trades that they had earlier incorporated into their guild: the hatmakers, embroiderers, and specialists in hat decoration. The linen drapers opposed them, declaring that the scarves were woven of linen and, besides that, were usually worn on the shoulders. This time the authorities allowed both guilds to make and sell the scarves, claiming that the competition would enhance their sale.

These commercial privileges were added to others that the linen drapers had received when the Cloth Hall was built in the sixteenth century. Officers for the linen drapers had the obligation to inspect goods coming from the rural areas to be sold in Rouen. Since cottage industry in normal farms and hamlets produced a steady stream of textile
products that contributed to the prosperity of Rouen and its surroundings, the female inspectors' place was important. They acted in concert with the king's inspectors of manufacture and had the power to enforce national standards and to authorize or exclude goods. Under their eyes passed bleached and unbleached linen, ticking, fine cloth, and tied and untied bales of cloth. Inspection meant fees, of course, and also an early chance to assess the market and buy the most saleable goods before any of the competition was allowed entrance.

Linen drapers were only one example of a guild expanding its commercial activities throughout its industry; the all-female guild of knitters (the *bonnetières*) also illustrates this point—but with a certain twist. The female knitters were relegated to knitting by hand rather than with mechanical knitting frames. They made up for their technical disadvantage by amalgamating into their guild the crafts of hat making with cloth, embroidering with a *machine à tavelle* (an early sewing machine that resembles the device we use to stitch up potato sacks), decorating women's head coverings, and lace-making. These industrial functions became the bailiwick they defended as monopolies both in manufacture and sales. They also managed to gain control of many costly decorative materials listed in their published by-laws in 1449.15

The knitters parlayed their right to manufacture items for the head, ears, and necks of women and girls into furnishing all sorts of hair-pieces. Over the furriers' objections the hat decorators (*enjoliveuses*), now amalgamated with the knitters, won the right to attach fur pieces to hats. They also made a variety of hats in fur as

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well as in silk, gold or silver cloth, velour, wool, and waxed or unwaxed linen. Their experience with fur led them to make and sell purses, game bags, and ladies' tote bags. They catered to women, children, and men, creating toques and mortarboards for judges and special head coverings for clerics. They also made every sort of decoration for hats, from bushy toppings and tufts for casques to feathered fringes and artificial flowers for women's bonnets.

For this range of decoration, the knitters and their associates acquired specialized tools like devices to attach rivets. They made lace with bobbins, on the pillow, and with their fingers. They used the *machine à tavelle* to apply tapestry technique to decorative bands. To create the extravagant traditional hats worn by the countrywomen of Normandy, they had devices to manipulate and cover iron wire with cloth and thread.

In addition, the women associated with the knitters' guild also made themselves indispensable to other guilds. Hatmakers in Rouen were obliged to employ the embroiderers to decorate any kind of band on their headgear, although the hatmakers might decorate the body of the hats themselves. Shoemakers also deferred to the embroiderers who added silk, pearl, or sequin decoration to footwear. Via this involvement in leather working, the women gained the right to make elaborate book covers. Thus, while other guilds forbade workers from outside their association to enter their workshops, the knitters–tavelle-embroiderers–hat-decorators (*bonnetières*–*brodeuses en tavelle*–*enjoliveuses des chefs-frets*) saw to it that other guilds were forced to hire its members. They enacted the sort of specialized work discipline that Michael Sonenscher discovered in Paris, except that here the products stayed in one workshop and the skilled workers came to it, rather than farming out the tasks to craft workers in their own
Reacting to pressure on commerce coming from expanded Atlantic trade and new consumer desires, guilds learned to respond to various market and commercial situations. They learned to be flexible, to expand their range of goods, and to use nontraditional materials. They amalgamated into their own body the auxiliary trades needed to produce their goods, the linen drapers gaining the right to dye material or to have it dyed; the knitters taking into their ranks the lace makers, embroiderers, and specialists in hat decoration. They fought to maintain the right to sell what they produced and to gain permission to enter wholesale trade with the materials they used in their own production. These guild women became fountains of commercial information for their businesses; it was the only way to ensure their own survival. They extracted full support from their privileged position as guild members, using the law courts, traditional guild rhetoric, and sheer nerve to challenge competitors whether they were male or female. Thus the guilds in the century between roughly 1670 and 1770, female as well as male, learned to apply traditional means and new methods to join in the consumer and trade revolution.

As the eighteenth century reached its last quarter, these guilds were hard pressed to maintain their balancing act between their domination of the market and the rigors of ever-larger need for capital and commercial reach. The linen drapers lost control of the wholesale cotton trade and many needlework specialties. They could no longer take advantage of the earlier limitation imposed on their rivals, the linen weavers, to sell only cloth that they had woven. Wholesale merchants gained the right to sell cloth without having woven it, and their trade overwhelmed the linen drapers as well as the linen weavers. By century's end
market expansion and institutional change swept away the guilds and exposed the former guild artisans to the force of new business scale and practice.