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Une Testérine. 1849. *La fête de la chapelle d'Arcachon, offerte par une Testérine à Madame la Préfète et aux dames bordelaises* [Festival at the Arcachon chapel, offered by a Testérine lady to Madam Prefect, and to the ladies of Bordeaux]. Bordeaux: Chaumas-Gayet.

I

### **“There Is Many a Thing That Can Be Done with Money”: Women, Barter, and Autonomy in a Scottish Fishing Community in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries**

**Lynn Abrams**

**S**hetland women “live out their lives within sound of the sea that was the battlefield and hunting-ground of their Norse ancestors, the sea that sings their first lullaby and their last dirge.”<sup>1</sup> This romanticized representation of Shetland womanhood—at once identifying the Shetland woman as a passive wife of the sea and yet an inheritor of the mythic Viking values of female strength and heroism—fed a distant readership hungry for stories of exoticism, difference, and pathos from the most northerly outposts of the British Isles. In this popular narrative, women are victims of the unremitting Shetland landscape and its domination by the sea, and of their husbands, whose dangerous occupation takes them away from the islands for long periods and holds out the specter of an early death. It is a narrative that juxtaposes the male world of seafaring beyond the shores of the islands with the female world tethered to the land, a narrative that fails to acknowledge the independent economic and cultural role of the fishwife.

A wholesale reinterpretation of women in fishing communities has challenged the traditional and rather outmoded representation of the brazen

<sup>1</sup> A. Stronach, “Scottish Industries in the Far North,” *Ladies' Field*, September 12, 1907, Shetland Archives, D1/135, scrapbook cuttings compiled by James Shand.

and uncouth fishwife and has acknowledged the diversity, complexity, and temporal and geographical contingency of women's roles (Nadel-Klein and Davis 1988; Nadel-Klein 2003). In northern Europe especially, studies have focused on the organization of the joint maritime household (Byron 1994) and have drawn attention to "the greater dependency on women to control land-based food production, greater role differentiation amongst males/females . . . and greater economic independence for women" (Smith 1977, 4). The upshot is that we cannot simply read women's status from simple models of the sexual division of labor. In the context of Shetland, this reinterpretation has great salience. The particular demographic characteristics of Shetland, a fishing-farming society in which women far outnumbered men—in 1861 the imbalance in the sex ratio peaked at 143 women to 100 men—created a situation whereby women marked out a role for themselves that traversed both private and public domains. The sheer fact of male absence—seasonal fishing trips and more lengthy whaling and merchant shipping voyages, coupled with a high emigration and death rate—created a society with labor characteristics that gave women a degree of economic and, more significantly, cultural power (Abrams 2005). This power rested on women's skills and endurance as domestic producers, their active role in the market as traders of goods, and their place in the community as possessors of certain kinds of knowledge or cultural capital. In this article I want to focus on the concept of the joint maritime household to unpack some of the gendered synchronicities of a system that relied on a sexual division of labor at sea and on land.

Shetland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a fishing-crofting economy of around thirty thousand inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> The majority of households made some kind of living from the sea but relied on the land to supplement this livelihood. Until 1900 the vast majority were ensnared in a system of fishing tenure that obliged tenants to fish for their landlords and to give them most of their bounty from the sea—and often from the land—in payment of rent and to offset the cost of fishing boats and gear advanced on credit. Women too operated within this feudal economic system—in their case for much longer—producing hand-knitted goods they exchanged for shop items in a barter-truck arrangement with local merchants, a system that obliged producers to accept goods from the merchant rather than cash payment for their knitwear. Shetland was

<sup>2</sup> Crofting is a form of subsistence farming in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland characterized by mixed production on marginal land.

thus an economy based on barter, credit, and indebtedness—a cash-poor society in which women’s productivity and ingenuity counted for much.

Women’s lack of access to cash with which to freely purchase items they could not produce themselves was a long-standing irritant they freely admitted. In 1872, when a British parliamentary commission visited Shetland with the purpose of investigating the truck system, Andrina Simpson, a knitter from the town of Lerwick, explained how she generally received payment in goods rather than cash for her hosiery as was customary. When asked what she would have done with the money had she been paid in cash she replied: “There is many a thing that can be done with money.”<sup>3</sup> Cash poverty was regarded as a constraint on women’s ability to capitalize on their productive capacity. Without cash, women were forced to take payment for their product in goods they did not need in order to exchange them for foodstuffs, often incurring a loss with each exchange. Without cash, women could not purchase raw materials for their work—raw wool or worsted—and were forced to enter into unfavorable arrangements with merchants who would advance them worsted against the value of the knitted product.

Yet wage-based economies, as Sally Cole (1991) argues in her study of women of the Portuguese north coast fishing communities, do not necessarily benefit women who have become accustomed to thinking of themselves as independent producers. Prior to the industrialization and economic diversification of northern Portugal, women in fishing communities there regarded themselves as independent workers and, indeed, by all measures possessed autonomy in the market and authority in the household. With the development of the Portuguese economy since the 1960s, women became less managers of household production and more managers of household consumption. As the household became more dependent on wage earnings and as the consumption of externally purchased goods increased, women’s power as household managers was reduced (Cole 1991, 145). In contrast to the household production system, whereby women’s management of resources was beyond the purview of their husbands, the modern wage-based household shifted economic power back to the husband as wives became dependent on the husband’s income. A higher standard of living was paid for with the loss of female autonomy.

This picture of the Portuguese maritime economy might be used to think about gender relations in Shetland, albeit over a longer period. Here,

<sup>3</sup> *Commission to Inquire into the Truck System, Second Report (Shetland)*, 1872, line 318, British Parliamentary Papers C (1st series) 555 I (hereafter cited as *Truck*).

too, women were conscious of their identities as productive workers. Indeed, Shetland women had a long tradition of acting as independent traders. In the seventeenth century there was a lively trade between local women hawking their hosiery and Dutch fisherman who traded fish on the shore. And by 1774 it was noted that “the whole time the [Dutch] fleet lay, the country people flocked to Lerwick with loads of coarse stockings, gloves, nightcaps, rugs. . . . The country folk are very smart in their bargains with the Dutch; they are now paid in money for everything” (Low 1879, 67). Nineteenth-century census returns are also testament to the significance women attached to their productive labor and to the more general recognition of Shetland women as independent workers. In the 1881 census only 16 percent of adult women were identified as without occupation, and only 4 percent of female household heads were categorized thus.<sup>4</sup> This is all the more significant when one remembers that the census enumerators were instructed to classify those women defined as “assisting” in family enterprises without pay as “unoccupied” (Higgs 1987, 70). Certainly many Shetland women might have fallen into this category if the instruction had been literally interpreted. But here marriage did not reduce women to unproductive dependents, as Andrina Simpson clearly asserted. When asked by the parliamentary commissioners, “Do you do anything else in the way of working for your living than by knitting?” she replied, “Yes. I am married.”<sup>5</sup>

For the majority of fishwives, in a place with limited opportunities for employment, the knitting of hosiery by hand in their own homes for the market was a lifeline. Hand knitting does not strike one as the most likely bedfellow of fishing and seafaring, but in fact it was ideally suited to the economic and environmental conditions in the Shetland Islands. Engaging up to two-thirds of women at any one time, knitting was flexible, it used a sustainable raw material produced on the islands, and it was interwoven into the island’s barter economy. Traditionally, historians have regarded hand knitting as a domestic handicraft left behind with the advent of mechanization and centralized textile production (Rose 1987, 1992). But here it thrived until the 1930s as a labor-intensive, female-dominated, home-based industry. Representing hand knitting as a domestic hobby undertaken by wives waiting anxiously for their menfolk to return from the sea was a common fallacy circulated by those who wished to imbue Shetland hosiery with mystery and a tinge of tragedy. According to one Edinburgh hosiery retailer, “each piece of knitting has a story, a tale YET TO BE TOLD, of women’s splendid courage and patient work while waiting

<sup>4</sup> Census of Scotland, 1881, Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, Edinburgh.

<sup>5</sup> *Truck*, line 326.

for her message from the sea.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, it was work undertaken by women independent of men’s work—the hosiery industry was female dominated at all stages, from spinning, weaving, and knitting to finishing, with the exception of the final point of sale.

Family stories recounted to parliamentary commissioners in 1872 illustrate the gendered synchronicity of maritime households in conditions dominated by indebtedness and the advance of credit. Charles Sinclair, a fisherman-tenant of one of Shetland’s largest landowners, Messrs. Hay & Co., was bound by the fishing-tenure system and thus obliged to fish for his landlord in order to pay his rent. The family was in debt to Messrs. Hay & Co. dating back some years before, as Sinclair explains: “My father had to find boats and nets with which to proceed to the fishing, and that put him into debt; and about four years ago I and my brothers had to come good for that debt.”<sup>7</sup> While Sinclair was away at sea, his wife and family obtained their supplies at Messrs. Hay & Co. stores on credit against the amount to be received for the fishing. When asked whether his wife was obliged to take what she needed on credit in goods rather than cash, Sinclair replied: “I cannot answer that, because I am not acquainted with what goes on while I am away.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Gilbert Goodlad recounted how he was similarly bound to his landlord, contracted to fish for him, and dependant on the landlord’s stores. However, in a poor season when families were in need of an advance of money or goods on credit, Goodlad reported that the merchants refused: “The people whom they left at home got so little that they could hardly subsist upon it, and they had to try some other means in order to enable them to live.” Goodlad’s two daughters knitted as a means of survival but never received monetary payment for their hosiery. When asked if he, their father, had ever sold hosiery for his daughters or intervened to try to get the merchants to pay cash, Goodlad replied, “I never did. They always manage these matters for themselves.”<sup>9</sup> This independence of women in fishing families was a constant refrain. John Leask, who expounded in detail on the travails of the fishing-tenure system that denied liberty to the tenants, was equally fulsome on his daughters’ work as knitters; once more it is clear that women who knitted hosiery engaged in trading relationships independent of their fathers and husbands and some-

<sup>6</sup> Advertisement, *The Scotsman* (undated, ca. 1900), Shetland Archives, D1/135, scrapbook cuttings compiled by James Shand.

<sup>7</sup> *Truck*, line 1135.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, line 1178.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 1201–4.

what independently of the merchants and landowners too. In this exchange John Leask explained the system:

*Have you any daughters in your family who knit?—*

I have two . . . they make worsted for themselves from the wool of our own sheep. . . .

*To whom do they sell them?—*

To anybody; they do not knit for a merchant. They go to any merchant they choose and sell their shawls, because the worsted with which they are made is their own. If they go into one store with the shawl, and the price is not suitable, they go into the next one. . . . They are paid in goods at any store where they can sell them.

*Do they ever ask for money?*

They have asked for it often, but they have never got it; and therefore they say there is no use asking for it, because they know they won't get it.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that in this cash-poor society, where fishing families were reliant on the goodwill of merchants to advance them the necessary goods to tide them over through difficult times, the little income that could be brought in by the sale of hosiery was a crucial factor in the survival of many families. But the women believed that if they could receive cash payments for their work instead of goods, their ability to trade as independent producers would be greatly enhanced. Andrina Mouat, quizzed about the operation of the barter-truck system, explained that she managed to sell her own hosiery for cash by sending it to her son who lived in Leith just outside Edinburgh who then sold her products to his shipmates, but within the islands and especially in country areas, cash was rarely offered and just as rarely requested. According to Mouat,

We would be glad of the money sometimes to buy things that the merchant does not have, or to pay our rent with; but the country people have plenty of these things, and it is only goods they are wanting, and that is the reason why they take them. . . . We have to complain of it many a time.

*Why do you complain?—*

Because if we had money it could answer for other things, and in other ways than when we get goods; but we cannot get it. . . .

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., lines 1366–71.



It is every one's complaint; and when we get articles, we are sorry to have to part with them for perhaps half-price.<sup>11</sup>

As Mouat's explanation demonstrates, knitters were in a weak bargaining position. With the exception of the finest hosiery, which always had a market outside Shetland, merchants rarely needed the items they were buying from home knitters. Knitters knew this, but they realized they were dependent on their reliable buyers. And yet as workers who valued their skill, they knew they were receiving a poor return for their work. A cash return, they believed, would be a fairer exchange and would permit them to operate more freely within the market.

However, the system of barter-truck that so constrained women's hosiery production at the same time facilitated a complex network of women's relationships, cementing a female culture through the exchange of goods and services necessary to obtain raw materials, to prepare one's hosiery for sale, to trade tea for potatoes or a credit note for butter, and so on. In Shetland women were intimately bound up with production and trade, which traversed the spaces between household and marketplace. Women formed strong bonds among one another through the economic and social relationships they established outside the home, and their direct role as producers and as contributors to household income and management meant that women possessed authority in the maritime household.

If we return to Cole's (1991) study of the Portuguese economy, we are reminded that a wage-based economy stripped women's economic power. And in Shetland too there is some evidence that by the 1970s a series of economic changes—notably the growth of a large-scale and investment-intensive fishing fleet, the expansion of fish processing (employing mainly women), and the arrival of the oil industry—marginalized women as producers in the context of the maritime household. Some women continued to knit, although now on a contract basis: “their earnings had become marginal in the direct production of income” and women's role in the household economy was diminished, reduced to that of “unpaid housekeeper and carer” (Cohen 1987, 174–75). In Shetland, as in other fishing communities around the world, the decline of fishing as the primary source of income and the emergence of alternative wage-earning opportunities—in low-paid fish processing, for instance—resulted in shifts in the gender dynamics in the maritime household to the detriment of women (Cole 1991, 127–35; George 2000, 31).

The joint maritime household, despite resting on the notorious system

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 2065–72.

of barter-truck, facilitated for the women of Shetland a degree of autonomy. The barter of goods and services required networks of reciprocity that a cash-based system did not. Although women desired cash payments for their work, which would have reduced their dependence on the merchants and allowed them to have acted as free agents in the market, we might speculate that such a system may have denuded women of the cultural capital accrued from the complex negotiations needed to convert payments in goods into household necessities. As examples from elsewhere illustrate, the ascendancy of the wage-based household meant a decline in the value of women's work such as hand knitting and thus a diminution of women's authority that derived from the ability to contribute independently to the household economy.

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