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Work and Identity in Early Modern England

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Abstract

How did work shape people's identity before industrial capitalism? It is a question that early modernists have never really got to grips with. Thanks to decades of research by social and cultural historians, we now have a much better understanding of how people in the past saw themselves and labelled those around them. But until recently scholars of early modern England have had surprisingly little to say about how a person's working life – their occupation, trade, vocation or livelihood – influenced their social identity. This essay is therefore an attempt to synthesise recent research on the subject into a more explicit historiographical intervention. Early modernists need to broaden their research to consider 'working identities' as a whole, rather than merely the narrower concept of 'occupational identities'. By exploring how work influenced a person's self-image and social role, we can reshape our understanding of broader social relations in this period and challenge some of the 'grand narratives' of early modern social and economic change.

Keywords: Labour; identity; class; gender; occupation

Identity has long been a key category of analysis for social and cultural historians of early modern England. But the exploration of occupational identity has not been especially central to this field. This relative neglect can probably be blamed on two prevalent assumptions. On the one hand, some scholars have dismissed 'occupational' identity as an anachronism in a society where many men and women had multiple jobs at the same time and repeatedly changed them over the course of their lives. On the other hand, some have regarded it as niche experience, confined to the small number of workers in formal craft guilds, where it supposedly slowed the emergence of broader forms of identity such as 'class'. There is some truth to both these views, but they

also obscure much more than they reveal and neither justifies ignoring this important issue. Economic historians have eagerly counted occupational titles, but social and cultural historians have lagged behind in paying ‘work’ much heed.

Recently, however, early modernists have begun to explore the relationship between work and identity more carefully. As often as not they have found the occupational title a hindrance as much as a help, and one of the key findings of this new research is that occupations are only part of the picture of working identities. But as yet this scholarship remains fragmented and no clear overview of the topic has been produced.¹ This essay therefore represents an attempt to synthesise recent research on the subject – in England at least – into a more explicit historiographical intervention.² Although we bring in some examples from primary sources, the central purpose of this piece is to highlight the ways that existing literature, when brought together, can be seen as reconceptualising the relationship between work and identity, and pointing the way to a new agenda in this field. Recent work reveals, we argue, that early modernists need to broaden their research to consider ‘working identities’ as a whole, rather than merely the narrower concept of ‘occupational identities’. And by exploring how work influenced a person’s self-image and social role, scholarship on this subject has the potential to reshape our understanding of broader social relations in this period and challenge some of the ‘grand narratives’ of early modern social and economic change.

The essay consists of three sections: the first draws on recent research to introduce the idea of ‘working identities’ and the diverse ways people’s work informed their sense of themselves. The second considers how this understanding of the relationship between work and identity might disrupt narratives of change in the early modern period. The third considers how working identities varied across gender, space, forms of ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour and different types of source material. We conclude by outlining an agenda for where we think further research into work and identity is most needed.

How did work inform identity in early modern England? The most explicit way was the according of occupational titles to men, a descriptor that sat alongside name and parish of residence as the most commonly deployed fragments of biographical information in a whole range of surviving legal and bureaucratic records from the period. These occupational descriptors were clearly central in framing the way contemporaries sorted and categorised individuals into larger groupings on the basis of their work, and their prevalence in the archive has made them a primary focus for quantitative approaches to the history of work.³ Although contemporaries reached for them frequently, and historians

¹ The best survey of attitudes to work in the period is Keith Thomas, *Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2009), ch. 3, though it focuses on elite views.

² For a survey with a much wider chronological and geographical scope, see Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-industrial Europe* (Leiden, 2012).

³ See the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure’s ongoing project on ‘The Occupational Structure of Britain 1379–1911’, <https://www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/occupations>.

can recover them relatively easily, recent research has increasingly questioned how much they can actually tell us about the relationship between individuals and their work. They are of limited value to historians of women's work, as female litigants and deponents in court records were generally accorded a marital status rather than an occupational label. Their value as guides to men's working lives has also come under scrutiny, with Tawny Paul arguing that their use in formal administrative records obscures the fact that few men could expect stable occupational identities in early modern society. Multiple and by-employment were much more common experiences of male working life, rendering single occupational titles as 'fictions of the archive' that are not an especially helpful starting point for unpacking the relationship between 'identity, masculinity and occupational plurality' that would have framed many men's sense of self. The early eighteenth-century diarist Edmund Harrold was a 'barber' by title, but cutting hair was just one job in a portfolio of employments that included wig making, 'cupping' (a medical service for lactating women), book dealing, money lending and dog muzzling.⁴

The rise of the 'verb-oriented' approach to the history of work has produced similar conclusions. This was initially developed to overcome the lack of occupational descriptors for women that precluded studying them through the 'noun-oriented' approach to workers in the past. Instead, historians search for archival references to people *doing* work activities.⁵ They have shown that women were regularly doing many of the tasks associated with occupations that are usually only accorded to men in the records, including everything from butchery to ploughing. In the process of transforming our understanding of women's work across early modern Europe, this body of scholarship has also called for us to rethink men's work in a number of important ways: not least the relationship between occupational titles and the work tasks men actually undertook. Alex Shepard's study of church court records found a considerable discrepancy in many cases between occupational descriptors given and the specific work tasks men engaged in. For some individuals this was due to engagement in by-employments; for others it was the result of life-cycle changes, with men in old age still using an occupational title that did not reflect more recent shifts in the work they were able to undertake.⁶ The Gender and Work project at Uppsala University also found that occupational titles routinely concealed a diversity of work activities in early

⁴ K. Tawny Paul, 'Accounting for Men's Work: Multiple Employments and Occupational Identities in Early Modern England', *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (Spring 2018), 43, 29, 26. For a similar argument in relation to eighteenth-century Italy, see Beatrice Zucca Micheletto, 'Husbands, Masculinity, Male Work and Household Economy in Eighteenth-Century Italy: The Case of Turin', *Gender and History*, 27 (Nov. 2015), 752–72.

⁵ Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bind: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986), 269–74; Sheilagh Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford, 2003); Maria Ågren (ed.), *Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society* (Oxford, 2017); Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood, 'The Gender Division of Labour in Early Modern England', *Economic History Review*, 73 (Feb. 2020), 3–32.

⁶ Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2015), ch. 7.

modern Sweden: tailors, for instance, are recorded in their database as undertaking activities as diverse as building stables, selling salt, collecting rents, keeping inns and lending money, as well as mending clothes.⁷ Results from the University of Exeter based project on Women's Work in Rural England, 1500–1700, show 'tailoring' activities as accounting for only 43 per cent of recorded work activities undertaken by tailors, with other categories such as commerce (14 per cent) and agriculture (12 per cent) also featuring prominently in the everyday working lives of these men.⁸

Despite this growing recognition that single occupational titles mask the complexities of men's working lives, they cannot be altogether dismissed by historians interested in working identity. Their widespread use suggests that contemporaries did find them a useful, if crude, tool for connecting work and selfhood, and that this went beyond mere administrative convenience. After all, single occupational titles featured heavily in a ballad literature that celebrated the occupational identity of bonny blacksmiths and the 'gentle craft' of shoemakers, identities that clearly appealed to some consumers of cheap print.⁹ Similarly, while most women were primarily identified by their marital status in both official records and literary texts, titles such as 'shopkeeper', 'midwife', 'seamstress', 'milliner' and many others were occasionally deployed.¹⁰ The argument here is that if historians direct their energies too narrowly onto the low-hanging fruit of occupational titles in their search for working identities, they will have little to say about the significant numbers of men and women for whom a single occupational title did little to capture the relationship between their work and their identity.

Instead, we need to be sensitive to other forms of what we might usefully call working identities, of which occupational identity was only one variant. Indeed, recent research has highlighted the existence of a number of working identities operating in early modern society, many of which were more effective at incorporating the flexibility and instability that were characteristic of experiences of work in the period. One such for men was the identity of 'tradesman', which, as Hailwood has shown, was inclusive of a range of artisanal occupations, and even some unskilled ones such as porters. It featured prominently in a broadside ballad literature that emphasised experiences and values that cut across individual crafts to define a broad collective of workers as 'tradesmen'.¹¹ For an individual engaged in multiple or by-employment;

⁷ Ågren, *Making a Living*, 35.

⁸ 'Women's Work in Rural England, 1500–1700', earlymodernwomenswork.wordpress.com.

⁹ Mark Hailwood, 'Broadside Ballads and Occupational Identity in Early Modern England', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 79 (Jun. 2016), 188–93. For more on depictions of occupational groups in print see Edward P. Taylor, 'The Representations of Millers, Tailors, and Weavers in Popular Print, c. 1500 to c. 1700' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Exeter, 2017), <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/29283>.

¹⁰ Amy Louise Erickson, 'Married Women's Occupations in Eighteenth-Century London', *Continuity and Change*, 23 (2008), 267–307; Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, 218–21; Laura Gowing, *Ingenious Trade: Women and Work in Seventeenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 2022), 35, 121, 223.

¹¹ Mark Hailwood, "'The Honest Tradesman's Honour': Occupational and Social Identity in Seventeenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 24 (Dec. 2014), 79–103.

or who moved between trades; or who transitioned over the life cycle from apprentice, to journeyman, to master, and then perhaps on to other forms of low-paid work, the ‘tradesman’ was an identity that could be sustained in the face of such vagaries much more readily than a narrow occupational title. Whilst ‘tradesman’ was an exclusively masculine identity, the same was not necessarily true of other working identities. To those whose working lives revolved around tasks that were insufficiently skilled to be considered artisanal, a working identity founded upon the notion of ‘living by their labour’ may have performed a similar function. Whilst the identity of ‘labourer’ was rarely claimed in the seventeenth century in the same way that ‘tradesman’ was, Alex Shepard has argued that labouring people – both male and female – were able to forge a sense of collective identity through an emphasis on their honesty, their industry and their relative freedom from dependence on others: something they saw as setting them apart from servants, despite the fact that labourers and servants were often engaged in very similar tasks.¹²

If both a labouring identity and a tradesman identity were relatively horizontal beasts – fostering solidarity between those of a broadly similar social status – other forms of working identity were more vertical in the bonds they encouraged. Most obviously and well known here are the craft guilds, which encouraged loyalty to a particular craft from the lowliest apprentice to the wealthiest master, often combining ostentatiously hierarchical rituals, such as guild feasts, with an emphasis on common purpose. Jasmine Kilburn-Toppin has shown, for example, that the ‘design, furnishing, and ornamentation’ of London’s Livery Company halls ‘celebrated and memorialised a distinctive craft culture of expertise and regulation, and honourable masculine artisanal identity’.¹³ Brodie Waddell’s recent work on the Essex clothier Joseph Bufton suggests that this form of working identity was not confined to formal urban guilds, but could have an equivalent in the small clothing towns of England in the notion of ‘the trade’. Bufton’s own position within the clothing trade is difficult to discern – very likely because he himself was subject to ‘tumbling up and down in the world’ – so it is unsurprising that he sought to promote an identity for male members of the clothing trade that was inclusive of combers, weavers and merchants alike, while excluding female spinners and unapprenticed ‘intruders’.¹⁴ ‘The trade’ represents another form of working identity that offered belonging to male workers whose precise position

¹² Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, ch. 5. On the importance of independence to labouring identities see also Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470–1750* (New Haven, 2000). For more on the identities of servants as an occupational group, see Charmian Mansell, ‘Beyond the Home: Space and Agency in the Experiences of Female Service in Early Modern England’, *Gender and History*, 33 (2021), 24–49.

¹³ Jasmine Kilburn-Toppin, *Crafting Identities: Artisan Culture in London, c. 1550–1640* (Manchester, 2021), 237. For company feasts, see her “‘Discords Have Arisen and Brotherly Love Decreased’: The Spatial and Material Contexts of the Guild Feast in Early Modern London”, *Brewery History*, 150 (2013), 28–38.

¹⁴ Brodie Waddell, “‘Verses of My Owne Making’: Literacy, Work, and Social Identity in Early Modern England”, *Journal of Social History*, 54 (Fall 2020), 161–84.

within it was very likely to fluctuate over their working life. It also reminds us that both horizontal ('class') and vertical ('craft') solidarities were at work in early modern society.¹⁵

A notable feature of early modern working identities is that they often sought to overcome the complexities of working lives by emphasising sets of values or ethics shared by groups of workers, rather than highlighting shared experiences of doing specific occupations or tasks. The emphasis was less on *what* you did than on *how* you did it. Indeed, the 'tradesman' identity that featured in cheap print often did so with the prefix 'honest' attached, and grouped together a fairly disparate collection of workers by highlighting their shared ability to earn money with their hands, their commitment to good fellowship and their abhorrence of dishonest dealing.¹⁶ Labouring people consistently put the stress on the fact that their work was 'honest', 'industrious' and 'painstaking', whilst downplaying the specifics of the varied and largely unskilled tasks they engaged in.¹⁷ It was not the tasks themselves but rather the hard-working approach that defined them – and the idea of the 'industrious labourer' as a positive constituent of the commonwealth appeared to gain traction across the seventeenth century.¹⁸ Garthine Walker and Jane Whittle have highlighted how the ability to effectively manage a household, and a distinct set of work skills were essential for women who sought to claim the title of 'good housewife'.¹⁹ For some an emphasis on the 'godliness' of their approach to working life could be central to working identity. Joseph Buffon saw himself as a 'godly clothier' whose everyday work was closely guided by religious teachings, as did the eighteenth-century Leeds diarist Joseph Ryder – the 'watchful clothier' of Matthew Kadane's study.²⁰ For other eighteenth-century male diarists, as Paul has shown, it was the possession and application of knowledge and skill in working life that provided the basis of a stable working identity that 'transcended the precariousness of work' and its 'occupational fluidity'.²¹ The importance of the distinction between skilled and unskilled workers, especially

¹⁵ E. P. Thompson, 'Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture', *Journal of Social History*, 7 (Summer 1974), 396–7.

¹⁶ Hailwood, "'The Honest Tradesman's Honour'"; Mark Hailwood, 'Sociability, Work and Labouring Identity in Seventeenth-Century England', *Cultural and Social History*, 8 (May 2011), 9–29.

¹⁷ Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, ch. 5.

¹⁸ Craig Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness: Work and Material Culture in Agrarian England, 1550–1780* (Cambridge, 2011), ch. 7.

¹⁹ Garthine Walker, 'Expanding the Boundaries of Female Honour in Early Modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Series, 6 (1996), 235–45; Jane Whittle, 'Women's Work and the Idea of Housewifery in the Memoirs of a Devon Yeoman, 1593' (Nov. 2020), <https://history.exeter.ac.uk/research/economicandsocialhistory/blogdiscussionintimetable202021/womensworkandtheideaofhousewiferyinthememoirsofdevonyeoman1593>.

²⁰ Waddell, 'Verses'; Matthew Kadane, *The Watchful Clothier: The Life of an Eighteenth-Century Protestant Capitalist* (New Haven, 2013).

²¹ Paul, 'Accounting for Men's Work'. For more on knowledge, skill and work see James Fisher, 'The Master Should Know More: Book-Farming and the Conflict over Agricultural Knowledge', *Cultural and Social History*, 15 (2018), 315–31; Jasmin Kilburn-Tippin, 'Writing Knowledge, Forging Histories: Metallurgical Recipes, Artisan-Authors and Institutional Cultures in Early Modern London', *Cultural and Social History*, 18 (2021), 297–314. For an important new analysis of continental

to the sense of identity of the former, is well attested for later periods; it had fore-runners in the working identities of the early modern period, which likewise emphasised the approach to work rather than occupational specifics.²² Early modern working identities – the honest tradesman, the industrious labourer, the good housewife, the godly clothier – hinged more often on the adjective than the noun.

Thinking in terms of working identities requires historians to recognise that these were often broader in scope than the occupational identities that we have traditionally sought when investigating the relationship between work and identity. Conventional analysis has seen working identities as a relatively insignificant form of social identity in this period because of the vagaries and variety of working lives. Recent research suggests instead that these factors shaped work-based identities in interesting ways, rather than simply undermining them. In part, this conclusion has been reached by approaching working identity in a more ‘emic’ way; investigating how contemporaries understood and described social identities and social groupings, rather than measuring the evidence against pre-existing templates such as occupational identity or class and finding them wanting.²³ That being said, we might then ask whether working identities were in fact more important, and more powerful, than some other forms of social identity that historians have tended to favour in their analyses of early modern society. The most obvious target here is the notion of ‘sorts’.

Using the language of ‘sorts’ to describe early modern English social identities and social relations originates from a similar impulse to the one driving the argument above: that historians may be better served by adopting frameworks of analysis that would have been recognisable and meaningful to contemporaries.²⁴ ‘Sorts’ has therefore come to serve as a historicised alternative to the more general concept of class, and is now widely deployed by historians of the period. It has been particularly prominent in accounts that distinguish between the ‘middling sorts’ and the ‘lower sort of people’, and that highlight the process of ‘social polarisation’ occurring between these two groupings: a process which is seen as a – perhaps *the* – key development in the social history of early modern England.²⁵ Whilst thinking with ‘sorts’ has undoubtedly proven fruitful, there is a risk that it crowds out other ways of thinking about social identities and social relations that may have meant just as much, if not more, to contemporaries themselves.²⁶

‘author-practitioners’, see Pamela H. Smith, *From Lived Experience to the Written Word: Reconstructing Practical Knowledge in the Early Modern World* (Chicago, 2022).

²² John Rule, ‘The Property of Skill in the Period of Manufacture’, in *The Historical Meanings of Work*, ed. Patrick Joyce (Cambridge, 1987).

²³ Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, ch. 1.

²⁴ Keith Wrightson, ‘Sorts of People in Tudor and Stuart England’, in *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England*, ed. Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (Basingstoke, 1994).

²⁵ This narrative is most closely associated with the work of Keith Wrightson, but for its wider influence see the essays in *Remaking English Society: Social Relations and Social Change in Early Modern England*, ed. Steve Hindle, Alexandra Shepard and John Walter (Woodbridge, 2013).

²⁶ Indeed, even the ‘middling sort’ did not necessarily see themselves clearly as such: Henry French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England, 1600–1750* (Oxford, 2007).

What happens, then, if we put working identities at the centre of our thinking about social dynamics in this period? They have the potential, we would argue, to disrupt some of our existing models of social change. There is evidence, for instance, that working identities could cut across the model of polarising 'sorts'. One element of that model relates to a process of 'cultural polarisation' that was driven by rising rates of literacy among the 'middling sort', who came to increasingly inhabit a mental world shared with their reading and writing superiors – whilst simultaneously growing apart from the cultural mores of the lower-sort 'rabble that cannot read'.²⁷ But the rise of literacy and of cheap print tells a different story when viewed through the lens of working identity. For Joseph Bufton it was his own literacy skills that allowed him to participate in and promote – through reading, record keeping and the composition of poetry – a solidarity across the cloth working industry, bridging a gap between richer and poorer members of the trade.²⁸ For many more tradesmen the growth of the ballad market provided access to a corpus of material that promoted an identity based on values of honesty and manual work that cannot be described as straightforwardly middling – and was in many ways hostile to elements of the commercial middling sort as well as to the gentry.²⁹ In both of these cases, the rise of literacy and its associated products did not simply serve to reinforce a process of social polarisation, but fed into forms of social identity that often cut across a neat division between the middling and lower sorts.

A focus on work-based identities also serves to highlight key divisions within the 'lower sorts' in particular. The 'honest tradesmen' sought to distance themselves from groups they considered to be beneath them: the dependent and the idle in particular.³⁰ They very likely saw themselves as a cut above those who lived only by their labour, but they in turn asserted that their industry set them apart from idlers, and from the more dependent status of servants. Likewise, as we have seen, the distinction that contemporaries made between a 'good housewife' and an 'idle housewife' were as much about these women's diligence and household management as about their family's income or assets.³¹ These identities could also cut across lines of gender at the same time as demarcating those between sections of the lower sorts, with Shepard finding that for labouring men and women 'their opportunities to forge solidarities in terms of honest industry were far greater than the formation of collective identities uniting labourers with servants'.³² The distinction between the 'industrious' labouring man or woman and their poorer neighbours may also have been a key and growing division as the seventeenth century developed.³³ Paying greater attention to these working identities therefore reveals a series of solidarities and fault lines at play in early modern

²⁷ Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580–1680* (1982), ch. 7. The phrase is Richard Baxter's.

²⁸ Waddell, 'Verses'.

²⁹ Hailwood, "'The Honest Tradesman's Honour'".

³⁰ Hailwood, 'Sociability, Work and Labouring Identity'.

³¹ Walker, 'Expanding the Boundaries of Female Honour', 238–40.

³² Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, 189.

³³ Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness*, chs. 4 and 7.

social relations that do not map neatly onto the model of 'sorts' and social polarisation.

If thinking about working identities might cause us to question the emphasis placed on the rise of 'sorts', it also encourages us to reflect on other narratives of chronological change. Traditionally scholars have suggested that working identities in this period were shifting from a 'medieval' to a 'modern' form, with a narrow 'craft' consciousness giving way to a broader 'class' consciousness over the course of the early modern period. However, recent research has shown that this linear narrative cannot explain the many cross-currents of change and continuity in this period. For example, the decline of guilds as a source of men's working identity in the seventeenth century has probably been exaggerated, especially outside the mercantile elite of the London Livery Companies.³⁴ More importantly, as noted above, the rise of literacy among working people and the spread of cheap print likely strengthened rather than weakened many 'craft' and 'trade' identities, whilst at the same time encouraging broader alliances across occupational groupings. Among the wider population, Shepard has found people increasingly describing their own place in society by specifying how they earned a living, rather than how much they were worth, but rarely in a conventionally 'class conscious' way.³⁵ While we do not yet have a new narrative that can fully replace the 'craft' to 'class' teleology, newer scholarship is increasingly recognising and tracing the changing ways that people's work gave them a sense of identity. Further work in this vein has the potential to provide a deeper understanding of the genealogies of modern forms of class consciousness, and to encourage conversations about the nature of 'class' and working identity across the premodern/modern divide.

Although working identity was prevalent and powerful – much more prevalent and powerful than, for example, narrowly occupational identity – it was not universal or evenly distributed. A sixteenth-century husbandman, a seventeenth-century mantua maker and an eighteenth-century merchant might all have strong working identities, but they cannot be simply lumped together as 'workers'. Moreover, many of the conclusions that historians have drawn about these identities have been heavily influenced by the specific types of sources they have used. If we want to understand working identities, and develop new narratives of their development over time, we need to think more methodically about these variations.

The centrality of gender to both social identity and working life in early modern England is now well established by decades of scholarship, and recent research has shown that these two issues overlapped in highly gendered ways. As we have seen, focusing narrowly on formal occupational titles makes it appear that only men had meaningful working identities. Not only were these titles often restricted to men, it has become increasingly clear that they were often linked to specific ideals of patriarchal manhood and fraternal

³⁴ Brodie Waddell, *God, Duty and Community in English Economic Life, 1660–1720* (Woodbridge, 2012), 194–206.

³⁵ Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, ch. 7.

pride. When the wool combers of Coggeshall called upon each other to ‘play the men’ by supporting a common fund for workers in the trade in the 1680s, they were asserting an unambiguously masculine notion of occupational community.³⁶ However, working identity was also widespread among women. Sometimes this operated in similar ways to men, such as the many women in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century London who asserted formal occupational titles and laid claim to the Freedom of the City through the Livery Companies.³⁷ Most women worked in less formally organised trades, yet they too might be seen by those around them as defined by their livelihoods. Although the ‘midwife’, ‘oyster wench’, ‘alewife’ and ‘marketwoman’ may not have had a guild, they had a working identity that was just as potent as any wool comber’s or shoemaker’s.³⁸ In many other cases, women’s working identities took very different forms from men’s, but were no less important. This is most striking in the case of titles such as ‘wife’, ‘housewife’ or ‘mistress’ which were used constantly in this period. As Alex Shepard and Amy Erickson have shown, these were often as much occupational identities as they were marital statuses.³⁹ By treating them as such, we can integrate unpaid work into our understanding of working identities. Using gender as a category of analysis for approaching these questions ensures that formal male occupational designations are not assumed to be the norm, thus opening up many other expressions of working identity to analysis.

Geography was another important factor in shaping such expressions, yet few historians have made any attempt to decipher the relationship between ‘place’ and working identities. Craft loyalties in incorporated cities – especially in London – have rightly received attention. Thanks to long-standing institutional structures in the form of guilds, high levels of literacy and print availability, and an exceptional degree of occupational specialisation, many urban workers would naturally identify closely with their specific trade. But focusing on these environments risks making a particular form of work-based identity the standard against which all others are measured. The existence of fierce

³⁶ Waddell, ‘Verses’, 9.

³⁷ Erickson, ‘Married Women’s Occupations’; Laura Gowing, ‘Girls on Forms: Apprenticing Young Women in Seventeenth-Century London’, *Journal of British Studies*, 55 (2016), 447–73; Sarah Birt, ‘Women, Guilds and the Tailoring Trades: The Occupational Training of Merchant Tailors’ Company Apprentices in Early Modern London’, *London Journal*, 46:2 (2021), 146–64; Gowing, *Ingenious Trade*.

³⁸ Eleanor Hubbard, *City Women: Money, Sex and the Social Order in Early Modern London* (2012), ch. 6; Tim Reinke-Williams, *Women, Work and Sociability in Early Modern London* (Basingstoke, 2014); David Pennington, *Going to Market: Women, Trade and Social Relations in Early Modern English Towns, c. 1550–1650* (Farnham, 2015); Charlie Taverner, ‘Consider the Oyster Seller: Street Hawkers and Gendered Stereotypes in Early Modern London’, *History Workshop Journal*, 88 (Autumn 2019), 1–23.

³⁹ Amy Louise Erickson, ‘Mistresses and Marriage: or, a Short History of the Mrs’, *History Workshop Journal*, 78 (Autumn 2014), 39–57; Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, especially ch. 6. For similar arguments in a continental European context, see Merry E. Wiesner, ‘Spinning out Capital: Women’s Work in Preindustrial Europe, 1350–1750’, in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard and Merry E. Wiesner (Boston, MA/New York 1998), 216–17; Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, ‘Work and Identity in Early Modern Portugal: What Did Gender Have to Do with It?’, *Journal of Social History* (Summer 2022), 859–87.

craft loyalties can also be found among tradesmen in unchartered small towns and even rural areas, but here they took different forms due to the lack of formal institutional support. The cloth trade, for example, offered a powerful source of identity to many men in Essex, Gloucestershire and Somerset.⁴⁰ Likewise, Andy Wood and Simon Sandall have shown that free miners in the Peak District and the Forest of Dean had an exceptionally well-honed sense of fraternal unity.⁴¹ Equally strong was the spirit of collective endeavour that emerged from maritime work, whether linked to a particular fishing village or to 'a floating factory' traversing the oceans.⁴² However, it is less clear how locality and work intertwined in the identities of, for example, agricultural labourers. We know that they had a strong sense of place, but we still have much to learn about how this might have related to their sense of themselves as workers. For some, the links between their daily tasks, their long-term livelihoods, the local landscape and the particular 'customs' of their manor must have been very close indeed.⁴³ When we broaden our lens to include English men and women in places like Ulster, Massachusetts, Virginia or Jamaica, the importance of locality to self-identity becomes obvious. To be a 'servant' or 'yeoman' in one of these colonies potentially meant something very different from the same label in the metropole.

Approaching working life in England from an Atlantic perspective highlights an aspect of this topic that became much more significant in this period: the deepening cleavage between 'free' and 'unfree' labour. Servants hired on traditional annual contracts, as noted above, might be seen as 'dependent' yet their livelihoods still offered a potential source of pride and respect that was unavailable to the growing numbers of individuals whose work was explicitly coerced.⁴⁴ Poor 'masterless' young people were increasingly pushed into various forms of judicially imposed labour: compulsory service, pauper apprenticeships, houses of correction and workhouses.⁴⁵ Moreover, with the establishment of colonies in North America and the Caribbean, tens of thousands of English men, women and children were sent to labour overseas through various forms of bondage ranging from supposedly consensual

⁴⁰ Waddell, 'Verses'; David Rollison, *The Local Origins of Modern Society: Gloucestershire 1500-1800* (1992); Hailwood, 'Broadside Ballads', 196-7.

⁴¹ Andy Wood, *The Politics of Social Conflict: The Peak Country, 1520-1770* (Cambridge, 1999); Simon Sandall, *Custom and Popular Memory in the Forest of Dean, c.1550-1832* (Atlanta, 2013).

⁴² Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000), 150; Cheryl A. Fury (ed.), *The Social History of English Seamen, 1485-1649* (Woodbridge, 2012); Cheryl A. Fury (ed.), *The Social History of English Seamen, 1650-1815* (Martlesham, 2017).

⁴³ Andy Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013).

⁴⁴ Mansell, 'Beyond the Home'.

⁴⁵ Tim Wales, "'Living at their own hands": Policing Poor Households and the Young in Early Modern Rural England', *Agricultural History Review*, 61 (2013), 19-39; Steve Hindle, *On the Parish: The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c.1500-1750* (Oxford, 2004), esp. ch. 3; Joanna Innes, 'Prisons for the Poor: English Bridewells 1555-1800', in *Labour, Law and Crime: An Historical Perspective*, ed. Francis Snyder and Douglas Hay (1987), 42-122.

long-term indentures to kidnapping or convict transportation.⁴⁶ Compulsion and coercion had always been a part of labour relations in England, but they became more salient as both domestic and colonial policies promoted forceful forms of labour discipline.

Of course a rising proportion of workers in the colonies were enslaved Africans and their descendants whose exploitation and oppression was far worse than anything experienced by white indentured servants or transported convicts. Their efforts to resist the commodification of their bodies and to assert control over their productive and reproductive labour remind us that a lack of records about people's self-identity should not be taken for passivity or inarticulacy.⁴⁷ Moreover, some of them ended up in England as 'servants' of ambiguous status, where many refused their assigned identity as permanently 'servile' workers through lawsuits or absconding.⁴⁸ Whilst historians have explored attitudes to forms of 'unfree' labour in colonial settings, what we do not yet know is how these trends shaped the identities of 'free' English workers in the metropole.⁴⁹ They could not help but be aware of the threat of coerced labour and the precarity of their own freedom, yet finding direct evidence of their attitudes towards this division is not easy. Literary scholars have shown one possible avenue by investigating the rise of racialised categories in drama, poetry and art, which often associated liberty with whiteness and servitude with blackness.⁵⁰ Furthermore, questions about the relationship between 'service' and 'consent' were already firmly embedded in English culture thanks to classical, biblical and medieval examples.⁵¹ Even if not always overtly racialised, anxieties about servile bondage certainly circulated among English workers. In one late seventeenth-century ballad, for example,

⁴⁶ John Wareing, "Violently taken away or cheatingly duckoyed": The Illicit Recruitment in London of Indentured Servants for the American Colonies, 1645–1718', *London Journal*, 26:2 (2001), 1–22; Anna Suranyi, "Willing to go if they had their clothes": Early Modern Women and Indentured Servitude', in *Challenging Orthodoxies: The Social and Cultural Worlds of Early Modern Women*, ed. Sigrun Haude and Melinda S. Zook (Farnham, 2014); Misha Ewen, "'Poore Soules": Migration, Labour, and Visions for Commonwealth in Virginia', in *Virginia 1619: Slavery and Freedom in the Making of English America*, ed. Paul Musselwhite, Peter C. Mancall and James Horn (Chapel Hill, 2019).

⁴⁷ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC, 2021), esp. ch. 6.

⁴⁸ Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Aldershot, 2008); Susan Dwyer Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640–1700* (Chapel Hill, 2007), ch. 6; Simon P. Newman, *Freedom Seekers: Escaping from Slavery in Restoration London* (2022).

⁴⁹ Simon P. Newman, *A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic* (Philadelphia, 2013); Christopher L. Tomlins, *Freedom Bound: Law, Labor, and Civic Identity in Colonizing English America, 1580–1865* (Cambridge, 2010); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004).

⁵⁰ Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (1995); Ayanna Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge, 2021).

⁵¹ Urvashi Chakravarty, *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2022); Naomi Tadmor, *The Social Universe of the English Bible: Scripture, Society, and Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), ch. 3; Michael Guasco, *Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2014), esp. ch. 1.

a 'Trappan'd Maiden' rhetorically laments that since arriving in 'Virginny' she has faced endless back-breaking labour and inhumane treatment: 'No rest that I can have, Whilst I am here a Slave'.⁵² Legal freedom to choose one's employment and seek redress against abusive masters – the right of a 'freeborn Englishman' – thus may have become an increasingly important component in the identity of many workers, and further work on popular perceptions of this issue should be a high priority for scholars.⁵³

We can only glimpse evidence of the role of work in social identity through the uneven and incomplete range of sources that have survived from the early modern period. Unfortunately, social and gender biases in literacy rates and related factors mean that relatively few working people have left us unmediated insight into how they saw themselves. Nonetheless, some such sources can be found in the archives, and innovative methodologies have made it possible to find traces of self-expression in other early modern records. The problem that has since arisen is the way each new study of this topic has tended to focus on a single type of source rather than analysing a wider range of contrasting genres. For example, the working identities that feature in diaries and other life-writing are naturally more individualist and nuanced than the occupational ideals promoted in commercial publications such as broadside ballads.⁵⁴ Likewise, self-descriptions in court depositions are conveniently numerous and socially inclusive, yet their inherent emphasis on 'worth' and credibility necessarily shapes the sorts of identities that are expressed in them.⁵⁵ We need to make more effort to draw comparisons across different genres to understand the nature of work-based identities. Expanding our source base to include other types of texts is a key first step. For instance, a different ideal of work and occupation might emerge in the self-descriptions used by petitioners in the thousands of surviving written requests submitted to local and national authorities, such as the 'verie good worke-man' who asked permission to build a cottage in Burton-by-Tarvin in Cheshire so that 'he might be readye to be helpfull to us his said neighbours in his worke as he hath bene hearetofore'.⁵⁶ Likewise, as Laura Gowing has shown, women's

⁵² *The Trappan'd Maiden: Or, The Distressed Damsel. This Girl was cunningly trappan'd, Sent to Virginny from England (1693–1695?)*, English Broadside Ballad Archive, ID 37023. For a detailed examination of the conceptual slippage between service and slavery, and the ways existing categories were used to forge new racialised ones, see Chakravarty, *Fictions of Consent*.

⁵³ For association between political and economic 'servitude' in this period, see Christopher Hill, 'Pottage for Freeborn Englishmen: Attitudes to Wage Labour in the 16th and 17th Centuries', in *Socialism, Capitalism and Economic Growth: Essays Presented to Maurice Dobb*, ed. Maurice Dobb and C. H. Feinstein (Cambridge, 1967); John Donoghue, *Fire under the Ashes: An Atlantic History of the English Revolution* (Chicago, 2013).

⁵⁴ For the former, see Paul, 'Accounting for Men's Work'. For the latter see Hailwood, 'Broadside Ballads'.

⁵⁵ Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, 10–27.

⁵⁶ 'Cheshire Quarter Sessions: 1618', in *Petitions to the Cheshire Quarter Sessions, 1573–1798*, ed. Sharon Howard, *British History Online*, www.british-history.ac.uk/petitions/cheshire/1618. For detailed examinations of paupers' self-presentation in petitions for relief, see Hindle, *On the Parish*, ch. 6; Jonathan Healey, *The First Century of Welfare: Poverty and Poor Relief in Lancashire, 1620–1730* (Woodbridge, 2014).

petitions for the privilege to practise a trade can provide insight into the distinctively gendered way they were forced to express their place in the City's trades.⁵⁷ We must pay particular attention to the differences between how people identified themselves as workers and how they were labelled by their neighbours, their social superiors and state officials. Now that the importance of these identities has been revealed, we need scholars to undertake direct comparisons between the widening range of sources to begin to piece together the multifaceted nature of working identities.

Working identity cannot – and should not – replace class, gender, race, religion or any of the other powerful concepts already central to historical analysis of early modern society. It does, however, have the potential to be more than merely an addition to the long list of potential categories by which scholars label their subjects.

Recent research on the power of work as a source of identity has – sometimes inadvertently – undermined common assumptions about social relations in this period. This article has been an attempt to bring together some of that scholarship to show more clearly how cumulatively it challenges a model of early modern society based on 'sorts of people' and unilinear 'social polarisation'. It has also highlighted the ways that new research on this topic will need to go further by adopting a wider frame of reference. Specifically, we need to better integrate our analyses of the various types of primary sources that we have available, explicitly comparing 'literary' and 'archival', 'self-created' and 'indirectly recorded', so as to better understand how the nature of the source shapes the expression of such identities. We need to know much more about variations in working identities across time, place, gender, forms of labour, and race. Again, direct comparisons between the evidence from early and late in the period, from city and country, from men and women, and from free and unfree workers, are vital because they will illuminate the limits of using the urban male artisan as the default standard of vocational pride. Examining how the rise of Atlantic colonialism and racialised slavery influenced the self-identity of English workers is particularly important for pushing this subfield beyond its parochial origins. New research along these lines – building on the recent scholarship highlighted above – could have major implications for our understanding of early modern society, and for long-term narratives about social change.

Finally, a reminder that this piece is intended as a spur to new research rather than an exhaustive review of a rapidly growing subfield. We have not tried to cover every issue and we expect that many further examples and counter-examples will have occurred to readers as they worked through this article. The task now is to marshal this evidence within a broader and stronger framework than has been used so far. A narrow focus on occupational titles or formal institutions vastly underestimates the way that work shaped social identity in the early modern period.

⁵⁷ Gowing, *Ingenious Trade*, ch. 6.