Throughout the seventeenth century, in farmsteads and cottages across much of northeast Scotland, thousands of women and girls in poor households used their spare time between chores to clean, card, and spin wool into yarn that hundreds of men wove into plaiding, a coarse woolen cloth that urban merchants shipped overseas from the port of Aberdeen. The bulk of the plaiding exported from Aberdeen went to the Netherlands, where it was bought by local merchants who arranged for it to be finished and re-exported to Baltic cloth markets that the Dutch largely controlled. The neglected writings of a participant in that trade named Alexander Skene, however, reveal a development obscured by the port books and customs accounts that historians usually rely on: that, for a few heady years in the first half of the seventeenth century, the Dutch also shipped Aberdeen plaiding to new markets across the Atlantic. In the 1630s Aberdeen merchants earned windfall profits, and Aberdeenshire spinners and weavers gained a modest measure of economic security, by supplying cheap woolen cloth for the Dutch to carry to their newly (and, as it turned out, temporarily) acquired sugar plantations in northeast Brazil. There, it was most likely used in barter with indigenous peoples and as clothing or bedding for enslaved Africans. The period of Aberdeen’s participation...
in the seventeenth-century Atlantic trade was brief, but it provides telling insights into the economic lives of women in a poor and apparently isolated region of northern Europe who were nevertheless caught up in an international textiles trade that by the start of the seventeenth century was already becoming global in scope.

When plaiding was in the ascendant, the effects on the port of Aberdeen were everywhere to be seen: the population grew, major building projects were undertaken, charitable donations poured in, and, between increased pensions and ample opportunities to earn money spinning, the widows and children who comprised the bulk of the poor of the town were provided for as never before. Women in more prosperous households also benefitted from the links to international capital that participation in the woolen export trade afforded, especially those wives and widows of overseas merchants and shipmasters who played an active and sometimes lead role in managing the family business—like Issobel Udny, whose over-zealous efforts to buy up dwindling plaiding stocks to ship to her husband cooling his heels in Flanders landed her in hot water in 1647.6 Out in the Aberdeenshire hinterland, however, the effects of the plaiding boom were almost certainly more muted. As in rural cloth industries across northwest Europe, profits generated by the plaiding trade pooled in the town but trickled out to the countryside. The most that can be said for the largely female workforce in the countryside is that its members could live somewhat better during Aberdeenshire’s plaiding boom, which resulted in such an intense commoditization of wool that rural women’s traditional by-employment in the household economy as spinners allowed them and their families to derive some benefit.

Then as now, the drive for lower costs shaped international trade. Labor costs were key; it was a simple equation and everyone knew it. “The value of all Cloath,” in the terse words of one of Alexander Skene’s Scottish contemporaries, “consists chiefly in the Workmanship, and these that can live cheapest, can make the cheapest Cloath; and so export and under-sell others.”7 The author went on to single out Aberdeen’s large hinterland in

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6 See below, 86–7.
7 A Representation of the Advantages, That Would Arise . . . By the Erecting and Improving of Manufactories: But More Especially, by That of Woollen-Cloath . . . (Edinburgh, 1683), 10. The same sentiment was repeated in David Black, Essay upon Industry and Trade, Shewing the Necessity of the One, the Conveniency and Usefulness of the Other, and the Advantages of Both (Edinburgh, 1706), 4.