CHAPITRE 18

15th-Century Gentry Women's Contribution to the London Economy as Revealed in the Surviving Letter Collections of the Paston, Stonor, Plumpton, Armburgh, and Cely Families

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Since the landed estate constituted a crucial asset for 15th-century English gentry, the latter gave enormous importance to its efficient administration and special care was therefore devoted to the management of its expenses and the protection of its economic interests. This was a logical consequence of its status as a financial enterprise of utmost importance, as the gentry regarded it[1]. Indeed, through their close involvement with their estates, and given that it was the latter 'that financed landowners' lifestyle,'[2] it followed that gentry men and women had to join efforts in order to safeguard the interests of this primordial unit on which relied their socioeconomic status.

Relying on the five surviving 15th century family letter collections, this article examines the role gentry women played in keeping the estate supplied with food and other necessary commodities and in managing its finances, as part of their larger contribution to their families' economy. The letters clearly demonstrate that, in many respects, the economic life of gentry families was intrinsically linked to that of London. Therefore, the present article naturally tackles the role, direct and indirect, these women played in the London economy. Indeed, it would be impossible to discuss the role women played in the management of late medieval English gentry consumption without evoking the importance of London, given the numerous references to these in the source material on which this work relies.

Country gentry had close ties to the capital and contributed greatly to its economy. They were—as relatively recent works on the gentry demonstrate—far from being exclusively rural as their name suggests. Indeed, country and city were 'integrated elements of a single society,' rather than 'separate worlds,' as Rosemary Horrox demonstrated in her innovative and pioneering study of 'The Urban Gentry in the Fifteenth Century.'[3] The study of the five collections under consideration proves Horrox's conclusion to be imminently true. They attest to the intrinsic relation which linked country and city. They also illustrate gentry women's crucial contribution to the economy of the estate, and by extension to that of London, as it will be demonstrated, though they lacked any formal power. A prelude outlining and discussing the links between the economies of country gentry and London imposes itself as not only relevant but essential to the understanding of gentlewomen's—mostly simultaneous—contribution to both estate and London economy.

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1 Kenneth Bruce Mcfarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England: The Ford Lectures for 1953 and Related Studies,* Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

2 Christine Carpenter, 'England: The Nobility and the Gentry', S. H. Rigby, ed., *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003, pp. 261-82, reference p. 268.

3 Rosemary Horrox, 'The Urban Gentry in the Fifteenth Century', J.A.F. Thomson., ed., *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century*, Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1988, pp. 22-44.

London and Country Gentry Economies

London is indeed inevitable in any discussion of gentry economy and consumption, and for that matter, in a discussion of female contribution to the latter. As early as 1606, the Italian political theorist Giovanni Botero published a treatise in which he highlighted 'the residence of noblemen in cities' as one of the leading 'causes of the magnificence and greatness' of the latter, given their large spending habits and attraction of people to the city[4]. Fisher, the renowned urban historian later analysed and expanded Botero's arguments in his paper London as a centre of conspicuous consumption.[5] His interest however was in the gentry inflow into London rather than the presence of the aristocracy, which was the focus of Botero's treatise. Fisher's paper stresses out the fundamental part played by the gentry in the massive development of the London capital.

Even though these works referred primarily to the16th century, London's depiction as a centre of consumption can be traced back to the fifteenth century, as the letters testify. In effect, country gentry gave enormous stimulus to the London economic growth through internal trade (inside London) as well as external trade (between capital and province) as the letters so clearly demonstrate. Indeed, they underline the gentry's contribution, in particular that of women, both through goods' exchange while they were in their country estates and directly during their visits to the capital.

Carpenter argues in her 1996 reissue of *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers*—in which she also looks ahead to Caroline M. Barron's article on the aristocracy and London—that subjects like 'The importance of late-medieval London to its hinterland and vice versa and of land-owners from all over England to the London economy' need more exploration, given the only recent interest of historians in them.[6] She states that 'the economic implications for London of the presence of so many landowners were profound, especially when they had often come to purchase food and other commodities for themselves.' [7] Carpenter thus stresses out the mutual economic impact on the Stonor and London economies. This reflection can indeed be extended to the other families' places of residence and London, as it will become apparent through this article.

In her 'Centres of Conspicuous Consumption: The Aristocratic Town House in London 1200-1550,' whose publication was anticipated in Carpenter's introduction to the Stonor Letters and Papers, Barron focuses on the Aristocracy's share in the development of the London economy during the stated period. She notes that gentry families such as 'the Pastons and the Stonors had certainly made their contribution to the economy of London in the fifteenth century.'[8] In effect, all the five families under consideration have contributed, though to varying extents, to the economy of fifteenth-century London. They were all bound to the capital in various ways. The women belonging to these families were an integral part of the economic exchange between London and country and played therefore a key role in the transactions.

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4 Giovanni Botero, *A Treatise Concerning the Causes of Magnificence and Greatness in Cities*, R. Peterson, tr., 1606, Book 2, chapter X, p. 63. Text available online on Early English Books' website at: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A16490.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext.

5 F. J. Fisher, 'The Development of London as a Centre of Conspicuous Consumption in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society XXX*, 1948, pp. 37-50, reprinted in F. J. Fisher, *London and the English Economy 1500-1700*, P. J. Corfield and N. B. Harte, eds., London: Hambledon Press, 1990, pp. 105- 118.

6 Christine Carpenter, ed., *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290-1483,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 21.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

8 Caroline M. Barron, 'Centres of Conspicuous Consumption: The Aristocratic Town House in London, 1200-1550,' *The London Journal,* vol. 20, n° 1, 1995, pp. 1-16, p. 1.

Why they Came to London and where they Stayed

Obviously, it was the absence of their husbands and/or sons which was at the very origin of the writing of the letters under consideration. During these frequent and lengthy separations which were one of the defining characteristics of this stratum of 15th century English society, and more often than not, the gentry menfolk were in London. The male correspondents were often away in the capital, completing their education at Cambridge or Oxford, attending to their personal business, negotiating claims at court, representing their counties in parliament, serving the crown, consulting their lawyers, or even serving a prison sentence.

Thus, and given the considerable amount of time spent in London, it was usual for these minor land-owning families to own town houses there. This was the case for the Stonors, who belonged to the upper ranks of the gentry, and whose estates lay principally in the Thames Valley. The Stonors' fortunes were based on 20 properties which the famous judge, John Stonor had accumulated. They were owning these, including property in London as soon as the first half of 14th century. Indeed, '[s]ir John de Stonor acquired before 1348 from Margery, late wife of Sir William Lovel, a messuage in the Lane of St. Peter the Little.' Sir John de Stonor had also acquired 'on 29th September, I334… another London residence at Westminster, which was afterwards called "La Mote".'[9] Both properties were sold eventually. The Stonors' link to London was strengthened through the marriage alliance between William Stonor and Elizabeth Ryche, a London widow of a wealthy London merchant.

Keeping London town houses was costly. This was the reason why only the higher aristocracy could maintain this privilege, which perhaps explains the selling of London houses by the Stonors. Less expensive alternatives were though available for members of the landowning class who could no longer afford it. In effect, 'many of the lesser aristocracy, or the gentry, found it more convenient either to rent an inn when they needed it, or, more often, simply to stay in a London hostelry'[10].

These alternatives were what the Pastons favoured. Many of the Paston letters were exchanged between Margaret, who wrote from Paston, Mauteby or Norwich, and her husband John I who lodged in the Middle Temple inn. There is also a letter from Margaret Paston to her son Edmond who was at Clifford's Inn in London to secure the family's rights. In the 1470s, however, the Pastons preferred the George at Paul's Wharf. In his last letter to Margaret, his mother, nearly a month before his death in November 1479, Sir John Paston (II) conveyed his worries about getting sick after his earlier return to London from Calais. These worries further increased since he 'fownde my chambre and stuffe not so clene as I demyd'.[11] While they offered a good alternative to town houses, London hostelries don't seem to have always been as hygienic and comfortable.

Once they had sold their town houses, the Stonors also rented public London inns, namely the Woolsack and the Sword in Fleet Street, the former in the 1460s and the latter in the 1470s and 1480s.[12]

The Plumptons and Armburghs also spent considerable time in London while striving to get favourable verdicts for the respective inheritance lawsuits they were involved in. Indeed, though the Plumptons of Yorkshire derive their importance primarily from the light they cast

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9 Christine Carpenter, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 43, p. 44.

10 Caroline M. Barron, 'Centres of Conspicuous Consumption: The Aristocratic Town House in London, 1200-1550,' *The London Journal*, 1995, vol. 20, n° 1, pp. 1-16, p. 12.

11 Norman Davis, Richard Beadle, & Colin Richmond, eds., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, vol. I, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 515, n. 315.

12 Christine Carpenter, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 43, p. 44.

on north-country history, it was in London that several correspondents wrote their letters, which widens the scope and coverage of the correspondence. Members of the Plumpton family 'were holding a knight's fee of the Percy barony of Spofforth as early as 1166. Known also through their many charters relating to their lands in Plumpton, a riverside settlement near Knaresborough, and in the West and North Ridings of Yorkshire.'[13]

Likewise, though he natively belonged to Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire, Robert Armburgh, Joan Armburgh's second husband, it appears, was a permanent resident at Westminster and, like the Pastons, he 'seems to have had very full knowledge of the law and to have known his way around the law courts.'[14] Yet, unlike Joan, who married beneath her, Robert Armburgh, came from a family which was at the lowest rank of gentry hierarchy. Though they portray the omnipresent concern with landed property characteristic of all the gentry families presented thus far, the Armburgh letters have little to tell us about estate management and though they offer us some interesting insights are not of the greatest use to the present inquiry.

The Celys, unlike the four country gentry families, were London merchants of the Staple and had their primary residences in the capital, despite their frequent business visits at Calais. While Richard and George Cely are the protagonists of the letters, their respective wives, Anne and Margery are the ultimate protagonists of the lawsuit in which the letters and papers served as evidence. Richard Cely senior, the father of the young merchants 'was a man of substance, with a town-house in a desirable area of London, an estate in Essex, and other land in Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire'[15] George and Richard lived with their respective wives in London houses that their father had acquired: George and Margery 'lived in one of the two houses that Richard Cely senior had owned in Mark Lane, London,' only three doors away from that of Richard and Anne Cely.[16] It was in these residences that Margery and Anne lived while their husbands who were frequently on business in the continent. In contrast with most of the gentry letter collections, the Cely letters aren't concerned with the family property and estate operations. In addition to the only two—particularly interesting—letters found in the collection, we are allowed access to a few items of equally considerable importance to our understanding of the experiences of women of the landowning class through the different levels of the gentry and just below the gentry.

All these collections thus acquire a coverage which goes beyond the purely restricted scope of country-gentry.

Women's Contribution to Supplying Estates

It becomes evident that members of all five families spent considerable portions of time, and of money for that matter, in London. For gentry families, the partition of roles required that women stayed in the estate and were responsible for its management while men were frequently away from it working to secure its interests. Yet this rule didn't completely apply to the Stonors. For this more established gentry family, the roles were reversed in the sense that it was Elizabeth Stonor who spent more time in London since she had decided, at her marriage to William Stonor, to keep living in London where her family resided and where she was supervising the

[13] Joan W. Kirby, 'Survival and Betterment: The Aspirations of Four Medieval Gentry Families as Revealed in Their Letters,' *Family & Community History*, vol. 15, n° 2, 2012, pp. 95-112, p. 99.

[14] Christine Carpenter, ed., *The Armburgh Papers: the Brokholes Inheritance in Warwickshire, Hertfordshire and Essex, c. 1417-c. 1453; Chetham's Manuscript Mun, E. 6.10 (4)*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998, p. 51.

[15] Alison Hanham, *The Celys and their World: an English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 3.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

wool business she had inherited from Thomas Riche, her first husband. William Stonor, for his part, continued to live in the family's country estate at Stonor. Thus, whereas Elizabeth stonor wrote her epistles mostly from London, Margaret Paston, Agnes Plumpton and Joan Armburgh, to name but the most prominent feminine figures in the collections, wrote from their provincial estates. Being wives of merchants of the Staple based in London, Anne and Margery Cely naturally lived in the capital, as Elizabeth Stonor did most of the time. It was in London, therefore, where the only two surviving female-authored Cely letters were composed.

Husbands and wives across the collections portray this mechanism that the gentry employed in order to protect and enhance their economic stability, which revolved around the estate, its efficient management and preservation. The letter evidence allow us to see this mechanism at work and to perceive its dynamics. Indeed, much of the letters illustrate the socio-economic teamwork which bound together these gentry men and women towards the preservation of their much-desired economic stability. These gentry women, as wives and mothers, contributed to the economies of their respective families with so much the same wholeheartedness and determination. One of the most direct and obvious forms of contribution to their families' economy and to estate administration that emerge from the study of the letter evidence is their role in keeping the estate supplied with the various elementary everyday commodities. In effect, the letters portray these gentry women as custodian of the household's stores and managers of their expenses.

This is illustrated in the correspondences through the continuous exchange of goods and money between the routinely separated couples; in other words, between London and the localities where their estates lay.

As has been noted above, the reason thanks to which these Letters were written in the first place owes to the distance which kept apart the male and female authors, who wrote essentially for pragmatic reasons and in order to perform the economic duties they were entrusted with in their ongoing quest for socioeconomic enhancement. The pragmatic aspect of these letters is to be seen through the requests for necessary everyday objects, which make an important part of the exchanges they illustrate.

The collections are full of references to this two-way exchange. Indeed, numerous are the letters to which women across the families appended 'shopping-lists' for their husbands or sons to get. This reveals, among other things, the sense of economy that these women possessed. In effect, a considerable portion of the requested items were available in the different counties they inhabited but only at exuberant prices, which explains these women's resort to ordering them from London. Quality and abundance of choice were also taken into account when it came to these gentry women's choice of places from where to supply their estates, hence their preference for London. Ultimately, among the ordered-commodities were also, naturally, and given the provincial residences from where they generally wrote and in which they lived, items that were scarce or unavailable in provincial towns. Accordingly, it has been suggested that '[p]ossibly women in the cities did not need to write such letters as often as those in the country, being in places where goods of a broad range … were more readily available and being separated from their menfolk less frequently.'[17]

Effectively, and given the inauspicious geographical position of their country estates, and their male-counterparts being in London during their routine excursions, the capital was logically to be regarded as the best place to turn to for estate stock supplies. This section will allow us to see how gentry women, through discharging this fundamental duty as estate managers, contributed both to the economic stability of their families while playing a significant role in the late medieval London economy.

[17] Roger S. Bagnall, and Raffaella Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC-AD 800*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2015, p. 28.

Barbara Hanawalt notes in her interesting study that '[t]he supplying of grand houses in London and the countryside with suitable clothing, drink, candles, luxuries for the table, and decorating was a major contribution to the economy of London, and much of the ordering was done by women.'[18]

The gentlewomen in the letters generally requested items like luxury textiles, food and spices, which were indispensable for everyday life in the estates. Bennett notes that 'Foreign goods of all kinds seem to have come very largely from London. These included for instance spices and flavourings, for which constant requests are to be found in the letters.'[19] Indeed, the Paston and Stonor letters offer numerous examples of these and are especially rich in terms of shopping requests in general.

The Paston letters offer the most important number of examples of shopping lists and requests for food and other various commodities, as Margaret was used to request her husband or sons to send her purchases from London. She writes, for example, requesting almonds and dates from her son John Paston III, and asking about the prices of a variety of other food items to compare with their prices at Norwich before deciding whether to get them from nearby Norwich or shipped from London:

> I send yw demi a riale for to by wyth swger and dates for me. I pray yw do as wel as ye can, and sende it me as hastely as ye may, and sende me word qwat price a *li.* of peppyr, clowys, masis, gingyr, and sinamun, almannys, ryse, ganyngal, 120safrwn, reysonys of Corons, grenys, of ych of these sende me the pryce of ych of these, and yf that it be bettir shepe at London than it is here, I shal sende yw mony to bye wyth soch stwfe as I wull have.[20]

In addition to the many similar letters, there is also evidence of Margaret's knowledge of the prices of some items and of specific London merchants from whom she recommended her orders to be purchased.

Similar lists can be found in the Stonor letters. In 1470, for instance, Jane Stonor reminded her husband Thomas Stonor at the end of one of only two surviving letters of her 'to be remembyrde apon genciayn, ruberbe, bays, cappys, pouttys, cheverellaseys, a nounce of flayt selke, lasses, tryacyl.'[21]

Requests of another nature and from the previous generation of the Pastons also exist. In the same letter in which she gave him happy news of the success of the match they had made for John Paston esquire, Agnes Paston asked her husband William Paston to send her a wedding gown for Margaret who was soon to become their son's bride. Agnes did not fail to precise its colour: 'The goune nedyth for to be had; and of colour it wolde be a godely blew, or erlys a bryghte sangueyn.' She also seized the occasion to order 'ij. pypys of gold' for her own use.[22]

Elizabeth Stonor also made a similar request for a gown she already possessed to be delivered to her: 'And goode Syr, as ffor my nawne [gowne that I] wrothe unto you off, I pray you that I mythe have hyt as sone as ye may.'[23]

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[18] Barbara Hanawalt, 'Standard of Living and Women as Consumers,' *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 156.

[19] Henry Stanley Bennett, *The Pastons and their England: Studies in an Age of Transition,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 56.

[20] James Gairdner, *op. cit*. (1895), p. 119-120.

[21] Christine Carpenter, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 43, p. 106.

[22] Norman Davis, Richard Beadle, and Colin Richmond, eds., Part I, *op. cit*. (2004), p 26.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 173.

The only surviving letter of William Stonor's third wife contains a similar request: 'I have delyvered a bill to Herry Tye of suche gownes as I wold have for þis Ester.' Her autograph signature reads: 'Your new wyf Anne Stonor.'[24]

These were common commodities that different gentry women from different families requested from their husbands. Much less common was Margaret Paston's famous and curious request for a list of weapons unavailable in Norwich to be delivered to her from London when Lord Moleyns, the powerful magnate and neighbour of the Pastons was preparing to seize the Paston's manor of Gresham in 1448.[25]

While the Paston and Stonor letters supply us with a variety of references to household purchases, the Plumpton letters have unfortunately much less to offer us on this subject. They however suggest that the ordered products were largely the same in all these gentry families. In Isabel Plumpton's only surviving letter, addressed to her husband, we find a reference to the pressing necessity of buying salted-fish from London to supply the estate stocks. She notes that his 'Lenten stoufe is to bey.'[26] Indeed, 'the store-rooms at Plumpton were empty and the season of Lent was approaching, when the usage of the time made it a sin to taste flesh, and therefore needful to lay in stock-fish and other like provision.'[27] A special order also comes within the same letter through which Isabel asks her husband not to forget his 'chillder books.'[28]

It was also quite usual for husbands to spontaneously send commodities to their wives as indicates, for instance, a letter by Margaret who thanks her husband 'for yowre letter and for þe thyngys þat ye sent me þer-wyth.'[29]

Similar letters attesting to exchanges of goods in the other sense, that is, from country to London also exist. Indeed, Elizabeth Stonor's letters are also full of gratitude for her husband for the various things he sent to her during her stays in London. In 9 October 1476, for instance, she writes and thanks him 'hartely as I cane ffore your good tynchys: ffore truly thay whare very goode and swet as I het hany many a day. Whereffore I sent my ffader hone off them to hys soper. Whereffor he thanke you ryght hartely.'[30] In another epistle of hers, Elizabeth thanks William Stonor for the gift of venison and coneys he had made her. She writes:

> thankyng you right hertely off all kyndeness to me schewed at all tymes, and nowe ffor your good Venysone and Coneys, the wheche you sent me be Heri Blakhall, the whech is gret deyntis to have here in London: wherfor I sent the halffe hawnche to my ffadyr and a cowpyll off coneys: and they recomaund them unto you and thanke you ryght hertely.[31]

These instances underline the continuous exchange between London and country estates which, while allowing these gentry women to get their estates supplied with the different commodities they needed, benefited the London economy too. Of particular significance is Elizabeth Stonor's contribution to her family's economic welfare and to the 15th century London economy, given that it was in the capital that she had taken habitual residence.

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24 *Ibid*., p. 306.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 128, pp. 220-223.

26 Joan W. Kirby, ed., *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Royal Historical Society, 1996, p. 181.

27 Thomas Stapleton, ed., *The Plumpton Correspondence: Written in the Reigns of Edward IV, Richard III, Henry VII, and Henry VIII*, Stroud: Sutton Pub Ltd, 1990, p 199.

28 Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 181.

29 Norman Davis, Richard Beadle, and Colin Richmond, eds., *op. cit*. (2004), p. 219, n. 127.

30 Christine Carpenter, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 170.

31 *Ibid*., p. 172.

There was a two-way exchange and evidence attests to the facts that husbands also received goods from their wives. For instance, in numerous occasions we see Elizabeth Stonor purchasing items for William from London:

> And Sir, as for þe vj cowpull of haberndens, the which ye wryte ffore, they shall be bought and sente yow ryght shortly. And as ffor your gownys of chamlet and dublettes of sylke, I have bought hem: the which shall plese yow ryght well, I trust to God, at your comyng, &c.[32]

It seems though that it was not always possible to get the requested goods even in a large city like London: 'Syr, I sent you halffe a honder welkys by Gardenar, and I wollde have sent you som hoder desys, but truly I cowde not get none: but and I cane get hony to morow, syr Wylliam salle bryng hyt with hym.'[33] On occasions, this was only due to logistic reasons: 'And Syr, as tocheyng the hogeyshed of salte that you wrote [to] me for, truly Syr I wold a sente yt to you with alle my harte, but þe bargys wer departyd before your letter cam [unto] me.'[34]

Through these gentry women's letters, we learn that not only goods but even servants could be exchanged as substantiated in one of Elizabeth Stonor's letters to William Stonor: 'and I pray you that ye wylle sende me som off your sarvantys and myne to wayte upone me, ffor now I ame ryght bare off sarvantys, and þat ye know well.'[35]

The same complaint of lack of servants and request for sending someone to help is to be found in the Plumpton letters. In effect, Katherine chadderton, sister of sir Robert Plumpton (d. 1421) wrote, while at York, to her brother at Bolton Abbey reporting to him, among other things, the sadness of their sister dame Isabel Thorpe who 'hath nether woman nor maide with her, but her selfe alone.' The lack of waiting women was decidedly something gentry women often faced and dreaded since in the same letter, Katherine states her own desperate and pressing need for the company of a young waiting woman. The rest of her letter goes:

> Also brother I beseech you entirely, if there be any goodly young woman that is a good woman of her body, & pay iiij and xx or more, and I woulde haue one of my owne kin, an theare were any, for my selfe. … I beseech you to gitt her for me as hastely as you may, soune upon Easter, and it may be. I can no more, for great hast of my jorny.[36]

This lack of an attending woman may perhaps explain the 'haste' she evokes in her concluding sentence, since she was left to manage all the chores alone. Another instance which comes to corroborate the assumption that this was a recurring challenge not only for women of the gentry but also of the merchant class is found in the Cely letters. William Maryon wrote to George reporting to him his wife's state in his absence. He explains:

> Sir, she is sad [preoccupied?] and not greatly merry, for that she is not so assisted ['is not so well provided with servants'] as she was wont to be. For now the nights beginneth to wax, and she is fearful for to go into any place in her house in the night alone. And she hath delivered Thomas her man [i.e. young boy servant] away unto his mother, and therefore she prayed you that ye would deliver you of another lad a' that side of the sea, for to be in his stead.[37]

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[32] *Ibid.,* p. 176.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 204.
[34] *Ibid*., p. 175.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 204.
[36] Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 24.
[37] Alison Hanham, ed., *The Cely Letters: 1472-1488*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 223.

It becomes apparent that the lack of servants and waiting women was something of a challenge to the women under consideration here and that it put more pressure and strain on them and added to the difficulties they faced in order to accomplish the responsibilities entrusted to them as estate managers. Cities' economic life, and that of London in particular, surely benefitted from this exchange of persons as it did from the exchange of goods. For the more numerous the number of accompanying personnel who attended to the gentry during their stays in London, the better it was for the economy since it was these, as Barron suggests, who helped 'put money into London pockets.'[38]

Supplying Husbands and Sons in London with Cash

While goods were frequently sent in direction of country estates by the menfolk who were usually in London, women, most of the time sent money in return. Indeed, a crucial part of their role as estate managers consisted in supplying their absent husbands and sons with money so that they would properly do their jobs in protecting the interests of their families. This has certainly had enormous stimulus on the capital's finances. A good example illustrating this role might be the following letter by Robert, son of William and Isabel Plumpton in which he thanks his mother for sending him money: 'Mother, I thank you for the (blank) at you send mee, for yf you were not, I were not able to live, for this same Chrismasse hath cost mee as much as you send mee. Wherfor I am afraid I shal not have money to serue mee to Easter.'[39]

A similar letter which demonstrates the decisive role that gentry women played in this regard is that of John Paston II, who writes to his mother Margaret Paston to ask for money:

> i beseche yow to purveye me c s., and also to wryght to Pekok þat he purveye me as moche, c s., whyche i suppose þat he hathe gaderyd at Paston and other placys by thys tyme. For wythowte i have thys x li., as God helpe me, i fere i shalle doo butt litell goode in noo mater, nor yitt i woote nott howe to come home but iff i have it.[40]

John clearly establishes a link between Margaret's sending the money and his eventual success in safeguarding the family interests, and even in his ability to come back home. This echoes Sir Robert Plumpton who also underlines this in a letter he addressed equally from London, to his wife who failed to provide him with the money he had requested in a precedent letter. Robert, who was trying to get the verdict pronounced against him reversed and establish himself as heir-male: 'Soe it is I mervaile greatly þat yee send me not the money þatyee promised mee to send with john wauker within 8 dayes after you and I departed, for I am put to great lack for it.' He concludes his letter as follows: 'Therefore, dear heart, I pray you to remember mee …and for diuerse considerations and greate hurts might falle to you and mee and our children hereafter, I heartily pray you to remember to haste the money vnto mee, as my especial trust and loue is in you.'[41] Just like John Paston II and his mother, Robert Plumpton tries to make his wife bare responsibility for the outcome. Indeed, it is difficult not to sense in these letters, despite the manifest affection they might be enrobed in, a slightly guilt-inducing overall tone.

There is a plethora of similar examples across the letter-evidence, which makes it evident that important amounts of money originating from provincial towns were absorbed into the London economy through this means. Several women throughout the generations and across

[38] Caroline M. Barron, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 7.
[39] Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 53.
[40] Norman Davis, Richard Beadle, and Colin Richmond, eds., *op. cit*. (2004), p. 515, n. 315.
[41] Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 185.

the families, as we see through the letter evidence, strove to gather sums of money to send to menfolk, only to be spent in London eventually, whether on business and other serious matters or on entertainment and more futile expenditures. The women enabled and organised this transmission of funds, though not always wholeheartedly as it will be set forth herein. Indeed, to account for these astronomic sums which many of these women considered to be unduly spent in London, the examples of John Paston II, Robert Plumpton and George Cely are more than revealing.

We have these men on the one hand, and on the other: Margaret Paston, Agnes and Isabel Plumpton, and Anne Cely. Yet, these men compare well with Elizabeth Stonor who provides us with a feminine example of lavish expenditure which stands in sharp contrast with the fore-mentioned women, at least in some respects[42]

In effect, in several of her letters, Margaret Paston scolds her son Sir John for overspending and for his extravagance. Many of the letters she addresses him betray her annoyance. This can be seen even in the fact that, at some point in their relationship, Margaret refuses to talk to him directly and charges his younger brother to report to him her state of mind regarding him: 'me thynkyth be ȝour brother that he is wery to wrythe to me and there fore I wyl not a kumbyr hym with wrythtyng to hym. Ȝe may telle hym as I wryth to ȝow.'[43] Margaret lets younger John know 'that I have a letter from ȝour brother, wherby I undyrstand that he cannot, ner may, make no porveyans for the C. mark; the wyche causythe me to be rythgh hevy, and for other thynges that he wrytht to me of that he is in dawnger.'[44] In addition to the unease it causes her, Sir John's inability to showcase any financial maturity and to manage his affairs with economy make Margaret nostalgic to her husband whom she holds as a model for her son. Margaret insinuates that Sir John doesn't compare with his father in terms of their sense of economy since the son spent twice as much as what his father would have. Always addressing younger John Paston, she says:

> He wrythetyth to me also, that he hath spend thys terme xlli. Yt is a gret thyng; me thynkyth be good dyscresyon ther mythe myche ther of aben sparyd. Ȝour fadyr, God blysse hys sowle, hathe had as gret maters to do as I trowe he hathe had thys terme, and hath not spend halfe the mony up on them in so lytyl tyme, and hath do ryth well. At the reverens of God, avyse hym ȝet to be war of hys expences and gydyng that yt be no schame to us alle.[45]

Her repetitive advice for Sir John to 'be war of hys expences' is always linked to notions revolving around shame and honour. In another letter she addressed on the 28 October of the year 1470 to one of the two Johns Paston, who were both in London, she makes a link between spending and honour: 'Be ware how that ye spend … but if ye take odere heed to your expensis, ye shall do your self and your frendis gret diswurchep.'[46]

The notions of 'disworship' as opposed to 'worship,'[47] (to use 15th century gentry wording) or honour, are indeed major, complex and recurring themes in these 15th century gentry collections. These notions within which 'a number of honour themes are entwined' are intrinsically, though not exclusively linked to spending, as Maddern's article brilliantly demonstrates.[48] Indeed, Margaret's concern with the family's social status and worship was at

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42 Elizabeth Stonor's expenditure is discussed below in: Gentry women's stays in London.
43 Norman Davis, Richard Beadle, and Colin Richmond, eds., *op. cit*. (2004), p. 359, n. 212.
44 *Ibid*., p. 359, n. 212.
45 *Ibid*., p. 359, n. 212.
46 *Ibid.*, p. 356, n. 210.
47 These notions are discussed in more depth in another chapter.
48 Philippa Maddern, 'Honour among the Pastons: Gender and integrity in fifteenth-century English provincial society,' *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 14, n. 4, 1988, pp. 357-371, p. 363.

the origin of her disturbed relation with her sons, especially Sir John on account of his extravagance and overspending. She openly criticises his wasteful spending habits: 'Ther hathe be mych mor spend in waste than schuld have mad that.'[49].

While Margaret had done much to sustain him and incurred debts for him, Sir John kept wasting family fortunes in London that the only way out from the financial crisis he caused was to sell wood or land, or even furniture, which Margaret more than resented: 'It is a death to me to think upon it,'[50] she desperately wrote.

His attitude made her refuse to pay his debts to Cocket: 'I putte yow in certeyn that I wull nevyr pay him peny of that duty that ys owyng to hym, thow he sue me for yt, not of myn owyn pursse; for I wul nat be compellyd to pay yowyr dettes azens my well, and thow I wuld, I may nat.'[51]

Above all, and to Margaret's greatest heartache, Sir John's extravagance made him neglect his father's gravestone which ought to had been discharged long ago and which have caused them to be talked ill of in the country. 'It is a shame and a thing that is much spoken of in this country that your father's gravestone is not made. For God's love, let it be remembered and purveyed in haste.'[52] Here is a beautiful summary accounting for Sir John's extravagance by Virginia Woolf's poetic pen:

> The money that might have bought it, [the gravestone] or more land, and more goblets and more tapestry, was spent by Sir John on clocks and trinkets, and upon paying a clerk to copy out Treatises upon Knighthood and other such stuff. There they stood at Paston — eleven volumes, with the poems of Lydgate and Chaucer among them, diffusing a strange air into the gaunt, comfortless house, inviting men to indolence and vanity, distracting their thoughts from business, and leading them not only to neglect their own profit but to think lightly of the sacred dues of the dead.[53]

Margaret didn't like the way Sir John spent money but the London economy was sure more than satisfied with these extravagant gentry men or women who were as Botero suggested one of the main factors for the emancipation of cities and their greatness. Margaret and John I's strictness and thriftiness were not agreed on by all even within the Paston household. For instance, John Russe, a servant of the Pastons, was of a different view and highlighted—while reporting to John Paston the father about how John II was fairing at court in 1461—the importance of open-handedness for someone who was at the beginning of his career, like his son: 'there shal no thyng hurte hym but youre streytnesse of mony to hym, for withoute he haue mony in hyse purse so as he may resonably spende amonges hem, ellys they wyll not sette by hem.'[54] Thus, despite Margaret's disapproval, overspending was a way of life for these gentry men staying in London that her constant remarks and advice were not of much avail, for the exuding of signs of wealth seems to have been a fundamental basis for this land-owning class.

Similar signs of exasperation as to what they perceived as their husband's wastefulness emerge from Robert Plumpton's wives owing to his squandering of the family's resorts in London in pursuit of establishing his right as heir-male against his step-sisters who represent the heirs general. Like Margaret Paston, Agnes and Isabel Plumpton kept forwarding money to

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49 Norman Davis, Richard Beadle, and Colin Richmond, eds., *op. cit*. (2004), p. 359, n. 212.
50 *Ibid*., p. 442.
51 *Ibid*., p. 917.
52 *Ibid*., p. 442.
53 Virginia Woolf, 'The Pastons and Chaucer,' *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, McNeillie Andrew, ed., London: Hogarth Press, and San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994.
54 *Ibid*., p. 247.

their husbands. They have showed much support as their letters demonstrate, yet, they were finally obliged to protest and show discontent.

Through the Plumpton letters, Sir Robert appears always claiming from his wives, first Dame Agnes and then Dame Isabel, money to be sent to him. He does not fail to express discontentment or surprise that his wishes aren't executed on the spot by his wives, as his letter mentioned before demonstrates. Dame Agnes Plumpton on the other hand seems to be constantly struggling to get the money paid despite the financial challenges and the difficulty of gathering money from tenants. Her responses manifest the restless efforts she makes to meet the emergencies partly caused by her husband's obstinacy to embark himself and his family in a protracted legal litigation. Overall, her responses are marked with a meekly patient tone, yet, as time goes by and as the financial situation gets worse, her patience slowly gives way to signs of annoyance and exasperation. We start perceiving in Agnes's generally docile responses to Robert's letters, which have an almost harassing tone, some signs of resolution and firmness. A case in point is her response to Sir Robert's fore-mentioned letter. When, after much effort, she ultimately manages to get the money from tenants and to forward it to him in London, she writes to him:

> Sir, it is so now þat I haue mayd you thewsans of the money þat ye sent to me for, & I haue sent it you with John Walker at this tyme, the which I shall shew you how I haue mayd schift of at your comminge; & I pray you that ye be not miscontent that I sent it no sooner, *for I haue made the hast that I could that was possible for me to do*.[55]

In another letter, she re-emphasises that she takes all the means available to her to provide him with the money to finance the litigation in London, thus insinuating that what happens does not fall within her responsibilities: 'And, Sir, I pray you þat you be not myscontent þat I sent not to you, *for indeed I make þe labor that is possible for me to make*, and as yet I cannot speed, but as shortly as I can I shall spede the matter.'[56]

At the reading of her letters, one cannot help but picture Agnes in a dilemma, whether to give way to her feelings of exasperation or to comply with contemporary conduct books which considered patience as a womanly-virtue par excellence, that she ought to keep in all situations. We may portray her with such advice, as that offered by the *Ménagier of Paris*, resonating in her head, as she writes to her husband. Indeed, the Parisian gentleman warns his young wife to remember the three things which, according to the medieval proverb, 'drive the goodman from home' one of which is 'a scolding woman' and he prays her, that 'in order to keep yourself in love and good favour with your husband you be unto him gentle, amiable and debonair.'[57] Judging from the way she responded in particularly difficult financial situations perpetuated by her husband, Agnes seems to have observed such advice so thoroughly. At all events, and despite the manifest efforts she does to preserve the family finances, she definitely seems to have taken conduct books particularly to heart, at least more than Isabel Plumpton, the woman who would replace her at the head of the Plumpton estate. Christine de Pizan's *Treasure of the City of Ladies*[58] examines the complex situation of medieval women of the landowning class which is due to their subservience as well as their role as estate managers.

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55 Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (1996), p 172.

56 *Ibid*., p. 158.

57 Eileen Power, 'The Ménagier's Wife: A Paris Housewife in the Fourteenth Century,' *Medieval People*, pp. 96-119, for the complete text see Tania Bayard, ed., *A Medieval Home Companion: Housekeeping in the Fourteenth Century,* New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991.

58 Christine De Pizan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: or the Book of the Three Virtues*, London: Penguin Books Limited, 2003.

Yet, at one exceptional occasion throughout her letters, Agnes appears to have manifestly ignored these and fervidly reprimanded her husband, demanding that he would manage the families' expenses responsibly: 'Sir, I marvell greatly that ye let the matter rest so long, and labors no better for your selfe, and ye wold labor it deligently . . . Sir, I beseech you to remember your great cost and charges, and myne, and labor the matter that it myght have on end. . .'[59] Undeniably, this suggests that her role as guardian of the household's interests was valued enough to take over all other concerns.

Isabel too made tremendous efforts to meet the unceasing demands for money of her husband despite the chaotic situation of the family estates. Yet she decidedly proves to be of a different temperament. Isabel is more expressive of her discontent and her impatience is more manifest than her predecessor regarding Robert Plumpton's cash-spending which remained unchanged and went unperturbed with the increasingly disastrous financial situation on the estate. Isabel tells him for instance, to make him realise the total lack of cash-flow: 'your son, William Plumpton, & Thomas Beckerdyke hath bene euery day at wood sence ye went, & they can get no money for nothing,' she doesn't hesitate to remind him that she turned out to be right in her judgment and advice for him and that he'd have better taken her counsel regarding the management of their finances: 'Sir, I told you this or ye went, but ye wold not beleue me.'[60]

Ultimately, Isabel Plumpton writes to Robert Plumpton after the judgement in favour of the heirs general, her impatience is manifest. Yet, she takes it upon herself to find an ultimate way out from the unliveable situation he had dragged his household in to finance his London excursions. The solution she could think of was no other than what the only thought of which was 'a death' to Margaret Paston. Isabel Plumpton writes: 'ther is land in Rybston feild þat Christofer Chambers wold bey, if ye will sel it, but I am not in a suerty what he will giue for it. But if ye will sel it, send word to your son what ye will doe, for I know nothing eels wherewith to helpe you with.'[61] Having to sell land was one of the most dreaded scenarios for this landowning class, for what motivated them to efficiently and actively exploit their estates, as Carpenter notes, 'was less the prospect of great wealth than fear of indebtedness that might lead to the loss of their lands.'[62] Margaret Paston, Agnes and Isabel Plumpton were thus facing their worst nightmare because of the wasteful habits of their menfolk, which explains their reactions. Indeed, once her duty of finding a solution discharged, Isabel vigorously addressed Robert: 'for God sake take an end, for we are brought to begger staffe, for ye have not to defend them withal.'[63]

Like Margaret Paston, Agnes and Isabel Plumpton's relentless support for Sir Robert wasn't completely passive. All the three women were fed up with their families' fortunes being wasted in London, hence the indignation which seeps through their missives. Regardless of their different personal characters and personalities, they all did what they believed for their families' best interest and stood up to defend their financial stability against the threat of wasted estate income, which was supposed to be wisely managed. Dames Agnes and Isabel Plumpton's relationship with Sir Robert was, as Kirby notes, 'one neither of inferiority nor superiority, but of the kind of rough-and-ready partnership which characterised the Pastons and, on contemporary testamentary evidence, many other husbands and wives.'[64]

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59 Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 186.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

62 Christine Carpenter, *op. cit*. (2003), p. 269.

63 Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 181.

64 Joan, Kirby, 'Women in the Plumpton Correspondence: Fiction and Reality,' *Church and Chronicle in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to John Taylor*, Ian Wood and G.A. Loud, eds., London: Hambledon Press, 1991, pp. 219-32, p. 223.

Anne Cely: The London widow's Dispute

Although not belonging to the same social class as the previously discussed families, the Celys' tastes and standards largely resembled rural gentlemen in many resects, including the centrality of land property and the large expenditures.[65] The family thus offers interesting comparisons with the four 15th century gentry families. Indeed, the Celys' legal ordeals arose from the same resentment of large expenditures expressed by the Paston and Plumpton women. Curiously enough, these money-related quarrels were at the origin of the preservation of the letters. While the latter deal exclusively with matters related to wool trade, they show how the Cely brothers and partners were active contributors to the economic and legal aspects of life in London. In spite of the fact that only two letters are addressed to women, the Cely wives and then widows were especially central to the legal proceedings.

During the seven-years-five-months period of their partnership after their father Richard senior's death, George and Richard already encountered financial difficulties. These were to a large extent due to 'the fact that they had heavy expenditure in England while their profits were likely to be frozen in Calais or Bruges.'[66] When Richard fell into debt following the death of George, he blamed his circumstance on his dead brother and alleged that George was indebted to him. According to Richard, 'George had owed him £28o(?) towards the payment of their joint debts, and a further £1,000 "or thereabouts",'[67] for which he sued Margery, his brother's widow. Following Richard's own death, the lawsuit was taken up by Anne, his widow whose petition to Chancery was—in contrast with Richard's vague statements— 'specific about the nature and amount of George's debt, the amount of stock held in common, and the income realized from it.'[68]

More importantly, in her petition to Chancery, Anne, who petitioned as widow and executrix of Richard Cely junior, executor of his father, claimed that George had spent all the brothers' joint inheritance in lavish courtship:

> And over and beside that, the same Richard the son and George occupied a stock of the said Richard the father amounting to the sum of £959 *is \d.* Whose executor the said [Richard was, so that the?] whole stock and gain of the same belongeth to the same Anne as executrix of executor. Out of the which stocks the same George, having none other goods, chattels or money but of the [said common stock, spent upon?] [je]wels diverse and many rich gifts and pleasures given to one Margery Rygon, then widow, and other her friends, time of his wooing, expenses of his marriage and household, and in lands b[ought to] have th'expedition of his said marriage, as much as amounted to his portion of the same stock. And also purchased as many lands and tenements as cost £483 135 *4d.* And in reparation... spent £100 and above. Whereby the said common stock was adminished by the said George to [i.e. diminished by] the sum of £1,486 75.

Indeed, given the substantial dowry she brought him, George had to take his part in the formalities preceding his marriage to Margery and other expenses relating to it, which explains his lavish gifts, like a gold ring which a note he had made on the back of a letter he had received proves: 'item, delivered unto John Veneke in fine gold to make a ring for my wife, 26J dwt - sum, 535 *6d*.'[69]

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65 Alison Hanham, *op. cit*. (2002), p. 3.
66 *Ibid*., p. 403.
67 *Ibid*., p. 406.
68 *Ibid*., p. 414.
69 Alison Hanham, *op. cit*. (1975), p. 214.

Some of Margery's allegations do match some of the accounts held by George. For instance, one entry specifies that a sum of £10 165 *$d* stg was paid by George 'Thomas Borgen [Burgoyn, mercer] for my jewels, praiser (?) John Elderbekke.'[70]

There is also proof matching of his acquisition of a £100-valued red spinel 'balas ruby' which had belonged to King Richard.[71] It can also be traced that in 1484 George acquired new land and property, what cannot be proved, however, are the astronomic sum of £483 135 *4d.* he allegedly devoted to this end as Anne suggests.

Similarly to Margaret Paston and Agnes and Isabel Plumpton, Anne Cely criticised the expenses of her brother in law and took an active role towards the protection of her family's economic interests by claiming the sum she brought to the family at her marriage with Richard and the benefit made on them.

Anne clearly demonstrated a very specific and detailed insight into her spouse's expenses and debts. She can be compared, in this respect, to Joan Armburgh whose involvement in financial dealings is portrayed in the letter evidence in documents such as Robert Armburgh's account of the Financial Dealings of Joan Armburgh and Her Second Husband, Thomas Aspall Esquire, with Richard Ketford, London Citizen, from 1417 to 1420.[72] Anne and Joan are also similar in that they made sure they attended to their legal battles personally. Their presence was not only confined to managing finances and maintaining businesses, it also reached the London courts of the law. As has conclusively been argued,

> husbands and wives did cooperate in business ventures, and men put considerable trust in the judgment and business acumen of their wives. As we have seen, men trusted their wives as guardians of their minor children, and 83 percent of the men leaving wills in the Husting court named their wives as executors.[73]

Whether they translated into scolding letters or into lawsuits, these women's financial concerns over the London lavish expenses of their menfolk (Margaret Paston's son Sir John, Agnes and Isabel Plumpton's Sir Robert, and Anne Cely's brother in law George) prove that these women played a major role in preserving theirs and their families' financial interests. They also shed light on some of their contributions to late medieval London economy.

Gentry Women's Stays in London

Women's participation to their families' welfare and to the London economy was not only restricted to indirect exchanges. We have only sprinkled evidence for gentry women's presence and activities in London, on which we will build to gain a better idea of their direct contribution to the city's life. Indeed, the letters indicate that a number of gentry women under consideration contributed directly through their visits to the capital. Of these, those of Elizabeth Stonor and Margaret Paston are the most informative. The letters exchanged between the latter and her husband John Paston I following her 1465 visit to him while he was in prison provide strong evidence of the lavish expenditures that took place during these gentry women's visits to London, thus shedding light on some of the ways in which these women contributed to 15th century London economy. In a singularly playful letter of his, John Paston I writes to Margaret

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70 Alison Hanham, *op. cit*. (2002), p. 411.
71 *Ibid*., p. 311.
72 Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 77.
73 Barbara Hanawalt, *op. cit*. (2007), p. 120. Hanawalt's comment also applies to Elizabeth Stonor whose letters attest of her trade partnership with her husband, which is discussed below in: Elizabeth Stonor's trade.

after her departing from London: 'Myn owne dere sovereyn lady, I recomaund me to yow, and thank yow of the gret chere that ye mad me here to my gret cost and charge and labour.'[74]

Margaret's answer a week later also acknowledges her husband's large expenditure on her:

> wourchipful husbonde, I recomaunde me to yow, dyssyryng hertely to here of yowr welfare, thankyng yow of yowr grett chere that ye made me, and of the coste that ye dede on me. Ye dede more cost thanne my wylle was that ye choulde do, but that it plesyd yow to do so, God gyf me grase to do that may plese yow.[75]

Despite the slightly inappropriate and presumptuous comment evoking the expensiveness of her visit—though the playful and general jesting tone of the letter attenuates, if not omits it completely—John's reaction was undoubtedly his way of acknowledging the efforts of his wife to the family's welfare, together with his affection for her. It is certain that his willingness to spend lavishly on Margaret's entertainment, against her wishes, emerged from his desire to please her and recompense her hard work. His unusual wit and humour, together with the doggerel rhyme which composed the other half of his letter were surely inspired by her visit. The latter, we may safely argue, has left him in an especially good and unusual mood, since 'in none of his previous correspondence does he indulge in verse or betray anything of this rollicking humour.'[76]

During this visit, Margaret's son John Paston the youngest wrote to her advising her of some places and saints to visit with Margery, his sister, whom he recommands his mother to take with her:

> I pray yow voysyt the Rood of Northedor and Seynt Savyour, at Barmonsey, amonge whyll ye abyd in London, and lat my sustyr Margery goo with yow to pray to them that sche may have a good hosbond or sche com hom ayen.[77]

Gairdner comments on this episode: 'The young man had already seen a good deal of life, and was familiar with the principal attractions of the great city, to which in all probability his mother was as great a stranger as his young sister'[78] While John Paston III's advice might indicate Margaret and Margery's unfamiliarity with the city as Gairdner suggests, it also sheds a gleam of light on some of gentry women's activities in London, which undoubtedly contributed to the city's economic, social and cultural life.

Another similarly significant evidence of the large sums of money spent on or by gentry women in London is to be found in the Stonor letters. Much like Sir John Paston, Elizabeth Stonor seems to have had a reputation of a lavish spender. This derives from two different though corroborating sources, namely Thomas Betson, her son in law, and Thomas Stonor, her brother in law. Betson openly, though tactfully and well-meaningly conveyed his concerns about her spending habits: 'I will avyse you, madame, to remembre large expensez and be ware of them.'[79] The second Thomas, however, seems to have been less tactful in his manner of proceeding so that Elizabeth was provoked when she learnt about the disparaging remarks he had made about her. This is apparent from the letter she addresses to her husband in which she

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74 Norman Davis, Richard Beadle, and Colin Richmond, eds., *op. cit*. (2004), p. 317, n. 191.
75 *Ibid*., p. 318, n. 192.
76 James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters 1422-1509*, AD, Westminster: A. Constable, 1895, vol. I, pp. 228-229.
77 James Gairdner, *op. cit*. (1895), vol. II, p. 233.
78 James Gairdner, *op. cit*. (1895), vol. I, p. 228.
79 Christine Carpenter, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 48.

inquires about her brother in law's motives behind his comments on her way of managing expenses. In this fortunately surviving yet unfortunately damaged letter, Elisabeth writes:

> I pray you grete wel my broder Thomas Ston[or from me desiring y]ou to seye to heme that I marvyll gretly what [. . . moveth] heme to saye schoyche langege by me as he dothe, for as . . . [that] I [wold] plok from your lyelod alle that I can to make a grete . . .: for þat I wote welle you can awnswere for me wele enowe. And so I . . . to defend me.[80]

She apparently tries to get her husband to defend her against his brother. Margaret addresses William on the issue, in the only other letter making mention of the misunderstanding between her and Thomas Stonor. We infer William's curiosity to know who had reported his brother's gossip to her:

> And as towchyng my brothyre Stonore, truly syre ther was no bodye þat tellyd me precysly þat hyt was he, but I knowe well hyt was he, ffore hyt was sayde to me þat I kept you here among a meany of boyes with othyre langwage more, whech was not fyttyng fore to have such langwage of any servant that long to you ore me: fore, and he remembyre hym selff well, he hath no cause to saye of me otherwyse than well: fore I never sayde to dysplease hym be my wyll, but fore hys own worshypp, and þat knowyth God, how ever preserve you. At London, þe vij day of Marche.[81]

While Thomas Stonor's indiscreet gossip offended his sister in law, it had at least the merit of giving us a clear idea about her inclination towards lavish expenditure. The advice and criticism Elizabeth received is to be seen through the lens of the late medieval expenditure limits imposed by moralists and husbands on women's expenditure. Thomas Betson's and Thomas Stonor's take on Elizabeth's spending habits are mere relections of the criticisms addressed to women's excesses.[82] They can be likened to the limits suggested by the *Ménagier of Paris* that a woman from the bourgeoisie ought to observe.[83]

Gentlewomen such as Elizabeth Stonor, who took pleasure in and could afford spending large amounts of money on shopping, must have found it particularly offending to receive such remarks, as Elizabeth did.

This, to these gentlewomen must have been something of a challenge since what made London particularly appealing to many gentlewomen was the opportunity for shopping that the city offered, as a poem by a woman named Isabella Whitney, written in 1573 indicates. The poem, 'The Manner of her Will and What she left to London and to All Those in it, at her Departing' [84] consisted in a description of the best places for shopping, an excerpt from it reads:

> jewels such
> As are for ladies meet.
> And plate for furnish cupboards with
> Full brave there shall you fi nd,
> With purl of silver and of gold
> to satisfy your mind;

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80 *Ibid*., p. 175.

81 *Ibid*., p. 180.

82 Frederick James Furnivall, ed., 'Bewte Will Shewe, Thow Hornys Be Away,' *Political, Religious, and Love Poems: From the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lambeth ms. No.306 and Other Sources*, vol. 15, London: Early English Text Society, 1866, pp. 73-75.

83 Tania Bayard, ed., *A Medieval Home Companion: Housekeeping in the Fourteenth Century,* New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991, pp. 35-36.

84 Paul Bailey, *The Oxford Book of London*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1995, pp. 16-19.

> With hoods, bongraces [shades for bonnets], hats or caps
> Such store are in that street.

The described streets were still similar to those of medieval London. As we have seen, Elizabeth did much of the purchasing, be it for her personal use or for the London house during her stays in the city. She was equally sending, as was demonstrated, different items of food and clothing to the household at her husband at Stonor. Along with her missives, the Stonor correspondence offers a portion of Elizabeth Stonor's account book enabling us to have an idea about both the nature of the items she requested or bought herself in London. [85]

While women belonging to different social groups had an incidence on the economies of urban centres, those with high standards of living were especially meaningful to the economy since 'the consumer products they bought were essential to all urban economies, including that of London.'[86]

Hanawalt notes that 'women were major participants in the day-to-day commerce of London. While not major producers of wealth in terms of crafts or large entrepreneurial activities, they were among the important consumers.'[87] The gentry women with whom we are concerned were no exception.

Elizabeth's preference for life in the capital in itself may suggest her love for spending and of social distinction, which were, as Kingsford suggests, at the origin of accepting a union with Thomas Stonor, which made her rise above her merchant station to the rank of the gentry:

> To Elizabeth one attraction was no doubt the prospect of social distinction. There are hints that her new relatives looked on her as something of a par- venue, who had involved her husband in extravagance; and she herself supplies us with a glimpse at the citizen's daughter who had become a great lady and gone to Court. She was much in London, partly perhaps on pleasure, but not forgetting to combine business therewith: for she was a masterful woman, who took an active interest in her husband's affairs.[88]

Elizabeth Stonor's Trade

Unlike the other gentry women dealt with here, one of the main reasons for Elizabeth Stonor's prolonged stay in London—which allowed her to have another major contribution, both to her family finances and to the London economy—was the supervision of her former husband's business, which is one of the main subjects discussed in her letters. Indeed, her letters deal, for the most part, with business matters in which she and her husband were involved.

A remarkably curious evidence of Elizabeth's involvement in her former husband's trade, and therefore of her active role in the economic life of 15th century London is to be found, by a happy coincidence, in a memorandum by George Cely, in which he refers to her by her former marital name 'Helsabethe Reche' and by the quality of 'mercer of London':

> Robert Cely.
> Item, the 26 day of June [1478] I sent unto my said brother by Ralph Lemington, closed in an letter, an letter of payment of Helsabethe Reche, mercer of London, containing £50 stg., payable at London the last day [of] November next. I delivered [the money] unto her attorney [at] 85 4J. Sum it amounts £62 105 Flem.[89]

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85 Christine Carpenter, *op. cit*. (1996), pp. 217, 224, 227, 233.
86 Barbara Hanawalt, *op. cit*. (2007), pp. 135-136.
87 *Ibid*., p. 135.
88 Christine Carpenter, *op. cit*. (2007), p. xxiii.
89 Alison Hanham, *op. cit*. (1975), p. 77.

The note illustrates a deal between a stapler, George Cely and a woman mercer, Elizabeth Rich, later Lady Elizabeth Stonor. It is worth-noting that, at the time when the transaction took place, Elizabeth had been married to William Stonor for three years. While it was commonplace among widows to pursue the businesses of their deceased husbands, women who continued doing so even following their remarriage weren't especially numerous. Elisabeth seems to have kept her former husband's name, which was probably even less uncommon[90], out of pragmatic convenience. It seems however that it wasn't completely unusual for gentry women in general to retain their first husband's title, as did Dame Isabel Plumpton's mother who, 'although married to Thomas, Lord Darcy retained her first husband's title.'[91]

Yet, Elizabeth proves herself to be a strong and unconventional woman. The letters illustrate her independence and force of character as well as her interest in trade.

A number of letters survive of Elizabeth Stonor that depict her managing and discussing wool trade affairs from afar with her business associates: her husband William Stonor and her son in law Thomas Betson.

The following excerpt indicates Elizabeth's involvement and great interest in the wool export business. It also betrays her concern for the profits to be made out of it that year:

> And as towchyng John Elmys, truly, syre, he is a marvelus man: I conseyve be my son þat he wold goo from his promesse þat he made to you and to hym of his woll þat hyt suchld***.** [I. e. schuld.] aryse as good in pokyng thys ȝere as hyt ded þe last ȝere: and þat I consyve he cannot make good: but never þe lesse I dout not but þat you and my son Betson wyll handyll þe matyrs well I-nowe: ffore blessyd be God ȝe be on þe surere syde: ffore all þe sayde woll I have ress[eyved] hyte and fayer howsyd hyt: and ȝyt ffore all that I wot well þat you and my son wylnot dele with hym othyrewyse than ryght and consyes wyll requere, and þat is best.[92]

In effect, many of the letters exchanged between Elizabeth Stonor and her husband and son-in-law are related to business, which proves her complete identification with her trade activity. It shows that it was something she kept to heart. Indeed, she seems to have been keen on attending to it personally, rather than leaving it in the hands of her husband to take care of it once they got married, as many of her contemporaries preferred to do.

Here are two other excerpts from letters addressed to her husband, which demonstrate even more how seriously Elizabeth took her business and how exacting and professional she was. She warns and advises him to take the necessary measures to safely get his debts paid back to him:

> Syr, I resayvyde ffrome you a letter by the wyche I consayvyde that ye canne not departe but it shulde be to your gret lose. Wherffor ye do ryght welle to set hyt in a suerte: ffore hyt thys (it is) no lytell monay that he howys you.[93]

She also appears to closely oversee and inspect the transactions in which she gets involved:

> And Sire, as ffor my sone Betsonne I herde no worde ffrome hyme sith you departyd: for ther commyth no passage this viij dayese. And Sire, I wold pray you whenne Davy Wrixame commyth to you owght off Cotty I wold, that ye wold send hyme hydder that he myght wryght to my sonne howe he have done in the contre.[94]

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90 *Ibid*., p. 196.
91 Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (1996), pp. 189, 200, 201.
92 Christine Carpenter, *op. cit*. (1998), p. 180.
93 *Ibid*., p. 170.
94 *Ibid*., p. 172.

Elizabeth also received letters from her husband and son-in-law who kept her informed on the progress of their different ongoing affairs. For instance, Thomas Betson writes from Calais informing her that he is intending to go to the mart to get the money due to them:

> Also good madame, and it lyke you to wete, as on Friday next after Corpus Christi day***.** [Corpus Christi Day was the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, i.e. in 1478 21 May.] I intend unto the marte wardes, our blissid lorde be my spede and helpe me þer and send me good payment off all oure dettours.[95]

Letters such as the following also demonstrate Elizabeth's strong taste for business:

> Syr, I have reseyvyd sen you departyd ij letterys frome my [sun Bet]sun as on Monday last wase, on of them deectyd to you. . . . . The whyche letterys I have red and wele undirstond them [. . . I] conseve by hese wrytyng that he ys very lothe that Elmys woll . . . departe frome heme: never the less he thynkithe that xiij markes and a d[i . . .] pryse for to bye lx saks: after that pryce it wold draw myche m[oney] and lytell gettyng suld be therin. And yet I truste to . . . . . have yt, for as I undirstond yt ys yete unsold . . . . . that my sun Betsun sent to me by the brynger [herof . . .][96]

It is clear that through her business activities, she contributed greatly to the economic life of her family and to that of London. Yet, she stands in contradiction to Margaret Paston's sense of economy. Kirby describes Elizabeth as:

> A masterful woman who usually got her own way, Elizabeth was nevertheless an astute and effective helpmate, whose inherited interests in the wool trade greatly enriched her new family; but social ambition led her to extravagance and it is clear that her household, whether in London or at Stonor, lacked the 'sad, wise rule' imposed by Agnes and Margaret Paston.[97]

In addition to her contribution as a mercer, Elizabeth's presence in London also sheds light on the crucial and diverse ways through which women participated in the social and economic life of the city, and this despite their lack of any formal economic-power in the urban community, as Jeremy Goldberg explains in his 'Women in Fifteenth-Century Town Life.'[98]

Their visits to the capital were certainly part of their duties as co-guarantors of family welfare, but constituted for sure considerable opportunities for the economy of 15th century London. Barron specifies in her article that 'It was vitally important to all Londoners whether merchants or artisan craftsmen, or hucksters and small-scale purveyors of food, that the aristocracy and gentry should spend time in their London inns.'[99]

Indeed, during their stays in the capital, gentry women surely benefitted these. We saw examples of goods being purchased in London, the following letter by Elizabeth Stonor gives further evidence for the benefit derived by salesmen and craftsmen from the presence of gentry women in London, together with the recurring theme of money forwarded to London:

> Allso Cosyn, my moder and yourys sent me monay to by her boge, and sche sent me a gobelet to amend: the wyche gobelet I have schuyde unto dyverys golldsmythys: and thay say hyt cane not be amendyd, but hyt be new made: and so I pray you to infforme my moder. And as ffor the

95 *Ibid*., p. 211.
96 *Ibid*., p. 175.
97 Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (2012), pp. 95-112, p. 103.
98 Peter Jeremy Piers Goldberg, 'Women in Fifteenth-Century Town Life,' *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century*, Johnson A.F. Thomson, ed., Gloucester: Sutton Pub Ltd, 1988, pp. 107-28.
99 Caroline M. Barron, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 7.

> boge my moder sent unto me ffor, I send hyt to her by Folyhet, the brynger heroff. And so, Syr, I pray you to in|fforme my moder, as hyt thys: and I will kepe the gobelet unto the tyme that I have answere ffrome her.[100]

In a like manner, though they do not offer as vibrant illustrations of women's expenses in London as do the Stonor and Paston collections, the Plumpton and Armburgh letters do mention the presence of gentlewomen in the city and their financial contribution to its economy. A case in point is an account of the Financial Dealings of Joan Armburgh and Her Second Husband, Thomas Aspall Esquire, with Richard Ketford, London Citizen, from 1417 to 1420.[101] The account details the debts Joan inherited from her husband and in which Robert Armburgh got involved subsequently following his marriage to her. The account also enumerates her personal debts to the London saddler, including those she borrowed through intermediaries or 'by her owne hondes,' which suggests her frequent visits to the city. Within the same lines, there are also various evidences concerning financial dealings between Joan, Aspall and Armburgh and Richard Ketford.[102]

More importantly, Robert Armburgh's account mentions one of Joan's visits to London to negotiate with Ketford, in February 1420: 'sche kam to London for to reken with hym and there he seide that he hadde delyuered to her husband vpon the see syde at hys last goyng ouer to Kaue iij li. in harneys and prayed her to have surete therof.'[103] It indicates that she wasn't at least totally a stranger to the capital but also throws light on her business abilities and the business conducted in the capital. While Robert Armburgh 'was almost never out of Westminster'[104] as his letters testify, we have a letter from Joan written at Westminster and addressed to Ellen, Lady Ferrers of Chartlyer in February 1428.[105] The letter thus testifies another example of her visits to London during which, as we have seen, she must have participated to the economic life of the city through the different activities revealed in the letters of other contemporary gentry women that we have been able to see. Hers, unfortunately, are largely silent in this respect. Another bit of evidence for gentry women's presence in London comes from the Paston women. Though she spent most of her life in Norwich, Agnes Paston, who outlived her husband by thirty-five years, lived her last years in London with her son William, till the break of the plague epidemic of 1476.[106] The choice of an elderly country gentlewoman to live her old age in London must be related to the opportunities it offered and of which gentry women came to the city to take advantage.

Conclusion

It becomes apparent that gentry women's role in getting estates supplied with necessary provisions was particularly linked to London. This explains the large place the capital had in these provincial gentry economies, which infuses through their letters. The fifteenth century gentry women also relied on local suppliers for a number of commodities as some of their surviving account books suggest. These complete the image and give an idea about their implication in the financial management of the estate. Yet, it remains that, as the letters

[100] Christine Carpenter, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 173.
[101] Joan W. Kirby, *op. cit*. (1996), p. 77.
[102] *Ibid*., pp. 78, 81.
[103] *Ibid*., p. 79.
[104] *Ibid.*, p. 52.
[105] *Ibid*., p. 92.
[106] Roger Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the Fifteenth Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989, p 267.

establish, the commodities which supplied the estates pertained predominantly to the economic exchanges with London.

The gentry women within the collections played a central role in the continuous exchanges of goods and money which were constantly operating between London and their country estates. Throughout these exchanges, women mostly ordered provisions from husbands and sons in London in order to fill up the household stocks, thus fulfilling an essential part of their role as estate managers. Meanwhile, they supplied their menfolk with cash to enable them to carry out the necessary actions, mainly professional or legal, to protect and enhance the family's economy and status. These exchanges portrayed both harmony and discord between the corresponding gentry men and women who variably were husbands and wives or mothers and sons.

While lavish spending habits, as those of Sir John Paston, Sir Robert Plumpton, Dame Elizabeth Stonor and George Cely, caused their perpetuators to be criticised, scolded, sued or gossiped; and while they have done disservice to the Pastons' 'worship,' reduced the Plumptons almost to beggary, prejudiced the dead (John Paston I[107] and George Cely[108]) and fuelled lengthy excursions into lawsuit-litigations, it remains that they have, for sure, enormously benefitted the 15th-century London economy, sometimes at the detriment of the family's interests. Women took an active part in these large expenditures which were directly poured into the capital's economy; sometimes enabling them, others criticising them, depending on the situation and on the interests at stake.

[107] John Paston I's gravestone was not made well after his death.
[108] Richard blamed his financial difficulties on his dead brother, George.