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Consumption and Gender in the Early Seventeenth-Century Household The World of Alice Le Strange

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Where does the history of consumption happen? The answer would be easy for the history of production: the workplace. Historians can use a well-understood taxonomy to organise their research: the farm, the factory, the office and so on. The history of consumption has never had this precision, thanks to the less location-specific nature of consuming. Clothing, for example, acquired its power as a bearer of status and taste, partly because of the variety of situations in which people wore their garments. Similarly, people have eaten food at work or in the street as well as in their kitchens. Studies of consumption have addressed this problem in a number of ways. Some ?go with the flow?, tracking the items of consumption across a range of situations, to show how meaning and use changes in different context. Others focus on particular sites where important decisions about consumption are made or a high volume of activity takes place. A popular one for historians has been the household.

Jane Whittle and Elizabeth Griffiths have written a detailed study of consumption in a single household, that of the Le Stranges, a gentry family in early 17th?century Norfolk. The Le Stranges lived in the parish of Hunstanton on the north-west Norfolk coast and had been associated with the area since the 12th century.

Whittle and Griffiths have chosen to focus on Sir Hamon Le Strange (1583?1654) and his wife Lady Alice (1585?1656) who married in 1602. When Alice?s father died the Le Stranges inherited the manor of Sedgeford, and their income rose to nearly £2000 a year, placing them within the upper gentry of Norfolk. The household records kept by Alice Le Strange provide a continuous series of accounts for disbursements, receipts and the kitchen from 1610 to 1654. A database was constructed from a 20-year sample of the accounts from 1606 to 1626, in addition to the receipt accounts 1606?12 and 1619?21 and kitchen accounts 1619?21. Analysis of this database forms the core of the book, although these are supplemented with building accounts and wills.

The pioneering histories of consumption, such as Lorna Weatherill?s or Daniel Roche?s, used probate and other records to focus on the period 1660?1800. *The World of Alice Le Strange* begins at least 50 years earlier, and one of the book?s arguments is that historians should pay more attention to consumption prior to the long 18th century. The authors certainly demonstrate that a wide range of consumer items and patterns of consumption existed in the early 1600s. They emphasise the mundane nature of most expenditure and then broaden their focus from the world of the goods themselves to the wider implications of these patterns. These include gender and social relations, the effect of the life-cycle of family members on consumption, and how provisioning a household shaped local employment.

This is not to say that some of the classic subjects of material culture such as luxury or fashion are ignored. Although the Le Strange family were not involved with the royal court or part of the emerging ?season?, they invested time and money in dressing fashionably. Hamon and Alice were big spenders when they went on one of their rare trips to London. In 1628 they spent £492 there, purchasing 308 items. This included the purchase of a new ?crimson damask? bed with furnishings for £84, and five tapestries for £41. Both Indian cottons and the ?new draperies? appear in the accounts. The Le Stranges bought 29 yards of calico in several colours in 1630, which were used to make a man?s shirt and for curtains. They bought other types of cottons for bed furnishings and cupboard and table cloths. However, most novelties that can be found in the accounts were European or English rather than from Asia.

Although this big spending in London attracts the eye, Whittle and Griffiths show that there was a hierarchy of shopping locations: those closest to Hunstanton attracted the most spending. This may not sound particularly surprising, but what is interesting is the role of Norwich. Most of the family?s luxury spending took place there rather than London. In Norwich the Le Stranges visited tailors, bought books, scientific instruments and a clock. The most regularly visited shopping centre was King?s Lynn where basic haberdashery and groceries were purchased. Alongside the geographical differences there were also distinctions between the goods acquired. Some clothing, such as silk stockings and Spanish leather boots, was bought ready to wear. For their best clothes the Le Stranges had outfits made up for them by tailors, although even there was a hierarchy as well. Local tailors were given pre-selected cloth to work with, whilst Norwich and London tailors were trusted to provide the most appropriate fabrics themselves. The Le Stranges also bought second-hand apparel and inherited clothing from relatives.

The household was also directly involved in making clothes. The Le Stranges owned sheep and their servants did some carding and spinning, though the majority was put out to weavers (to make cloth for household use rather than clothing) and knitters (for hose and stockings). These differences are reflected in the record keeping. Tailors are named in the accounts and were paid by bill; spinners and knitters are unnamed and paid by the task. Retailers are never named and the household seems to have bought very little at markets or from pedlars. The authors argue that this evidence points to the strong personal links between consumers and producers in this period, with middlemen being in a subordinate position. Hamon borrowed money from his London tailor, as well as the ?town of Lynn?. A similar argument is made for food. As with types of cloth, a variety of foods appear in the accounts, including a wide range of meats and fish. Novelties of the 17th century such as cherries, peaches, nectarines and artichokes all appear here. However, compared to the recipes in cookery books of the period they ate a simple diet in which mutton, cheese and lamb featured strongly. The kitchen accounts reveal the strong influence of seasonality on what was eaten, as well as local influence. Closeness to the sea, for example, explains the variety of fish eaten.

At the core of the book is gender analysis. Within eight years of their marriage Alice Le Strange took over the management of the household accounts from her husband and then, in the 1630s, took over the estate accounts too. She introduced more detailed accounting techniques, listing all relevant items and dividing them into categories for cross referencing. She moved food and building expenditure into their own separate accounts and introduced half yearly stock-taking in the kitchen. A similar process of improving record keeping occurred when she had control of the estate accounts. Alice was not unusual in being a gentlewoman keeping household accounts. Indeed, she had a model in the accounts that Hamon?s great, great, grandmother Anne Le Strange kept in the 1530s. It is clear that Alice consulted these earlier records and may have used them as a model for her own. However, the authors suggest she was unusual in having control over the household accounts whilst her husband was alive and living alongside her. Hamon Le Strange appreciated his wife?s talents because of her ?ever incessant industry in strayness of knowledge above her sex, to the just, faithfull and laudable advantage and advancement of myne estate? (p. 33).

The Le Stranges owned four marriage advice books and three husbandry manuals. The authors conclude that the range of skills Alice le Strange demonstrated in her management of the household, coupled with her subordination to her husband, conform to the ideal of the housewife presented in the advice literature. In contrast to two other Norfolk gentlewomen examined in the book, Alice?s household management stands out for its stability over several decades. The accounts are also used to explore the gender difference in spending on education and allowances. There was quite a stark divide between the spending on the Le Stranges? sons and daughter. Whilst the sons were sent away to school, Elizabeth was kept at home. She learnt to read and write but the only book bought for her was a primer and the only tuition paid for was a singing lesson at the age of 20. In contrast, the allowances provided for the eldest son Nickolas were twice that of his sister?s dowry.

In some respects the book?s analysis of gender and consumption is close to that of the historiography of a later period. The differences between men?s and women?s shopping described by Amanda Vickery for the 18th century are found in Hamon's and Alice?s purchasing habits. Although the amounts spent by Hamon and Alice on luxuries were about equal, the objects acquired were not. Hamon followed fashion as much as his wife did, described clothes in detail in his will and left nearly as many clothes as his wife. He took charge not only of buying his own clothes, but also items relating his to social or leisure interests. These could be crudely called ?men?s stuff?. He bought leather goods such as those associated with horses, and the books for the large library at Hunstanton. He also had control of expenditure for improving the house. Meanwhile, Alice bought clothing and other items for herself, but was also in charge of all purchasing for the day-to-day running of the household. Items bought for the household were not only more basic but clearly marked distinctions between men and women: for example, goods bought relating to women?s domestic work, such as aprons. Toys and clothing bought for children also reflect this divide. Hamon?s sons played with items connected with hunting, bowls or music. Elizabeth did not receive such items. Instead her parents bought her items such as her first gown and bodice.

Whittle and Griffiths connect this gender division in spending with social status. Arguing against Thorsten Veblen who thought that conspicuous consumption was mainly conducted by bourgeois wives, they argue that it was male gentry who spent the most freely and most frequently in ways that served to demonstrate social status. Gentry position was displayed through infrequent but lavish spending. Hamon, for instance, had something of a horse habit, buying £329 worth of horses and selling £207 over a 15-year period. The authors also use their material to argue against the idea of Grant McCracken, that elites distinguished themselves through ?patina?, that is, objects that looked old and reflected the continuity of the aristocracy. McCracken?s chosen example was silver, but the Le Stranges replaced their silver regularly. Old items that were kept or passed on were valued for their sentimental connection with other family members. What did mark the family out from their social inferiors was the need to pay the political and legal costs expected of the gentry. Political and legal expenditure increased from the 1620s and then ?ballooned? in the Civil War decade ? at £413 p.a. ? thanks to higher taxation, requisitioning and having to pay for the Royalist defence of King?s Lynn. This meant less money was available for textiles and building works.

However, the book's overarching framework of ?elite consumption? will be too restrictive for many readers. This limits the term to expenditure on items only the elite bought. The authors want this definition to work because it will reinforce their argument that in the fields of textiles and food the Le Stranges were part of a common material culture. That is to say that they were closer to the material lives of their tenants than to the gentry at the Stuart court. For one thing, this argument is undercut by the many instances of social differentiation via consumption that they find, including in the mundane fields they emphasise. For another, it seems conceptually confusing. To use a modern analogy, people who buy brand new BMWs share a material culture with those who buy second-hand ones, but the big differences in expenditure between the two suggest that the buying of new ones can be properly labelled luxury consumption, whilst that of the others cannot.

Consumption did not just help to construct social status but also reinforced social obligations. Here the authors turn to an interesting series of records of food given as gifts to the household. Unlike those who sold food to the Le Stranges, the names of gift givers were recorded in the kitchen accounts. 317 individuals are named, almost all tenants of the Le Stranges. Over 100 different types of gift are recorded with chickens being the most commonly given item. Higher-status tenants gave more expensive items like turkeys. Unlike in the classic anthropological studies of gift-giving, where there is a delay in reciprocating the gift, in the Le Strange household gifts were instantly acknowledged. What the records call ?rewards? were given to the gift giver. These were cash payments with a sliding scale in operation to reflect the value of the original gift: a chicken received 6d, a turkey 7d. Gift giving not only reinforced the relationship between landlord and tenant, but also other forms of social bonds. A third of gift-givers were female, and the items they gave reflected the work they would have done in or for the household. Wet nurses, for example, gave gifts around the time of the birth of the Le Stranges? children. The records were kept for many years and this allows for a chronological analysis. Christmas emerges, unsurprisingly, as the high point of gift giving. Over the long term, there was a falling away in the number of gifts given to the Le Stranges, with a dramatic decline from the outbreak of the Civil War. The authors interpret this as evidence of the unpopularity of the family for their Royalism, although it could also be tenants having to manage their resources more carefully in a time of dislocation.

Unlike some historians who confine the theory to the introduction, Whittle and Griffiths bring in social science concepts at relevant moments to illuminate their arguments. Although they refer to Jan de Vries, they steer clear of placing the Le Strange household within the argument over the 'industrious revolution'. They are also more methodologically ecumenical than De Vries, although the influence of the anthropologist Daniel Miller is clear at key points. As they acknowledge, in places their definition of consumption is stretched until it becomes ?expenditure?. There are gains to be made by doing this, particularly by putting spending on food and textiles within their financial place. More money was spent on political and legal costs or building works, than on apparel and groceries. The kitchen and the wardrobe made up about a third of the yearly budget. However, this study also reveals some of the limits to organising histories of consumption round the household. In contrast to an object-centred study it becomes hard to fully explain some of the changes in consumption seen in the accounts. For example, as the tailors were allowed to choose the fabrics they made up into garments, changes in the Le Stranges' most expensive clothing would seem to lie outside the household.

Indeed the book backs off from placing the Le Stranges within longer-term change. At times they appear to have continuity with the 16th century, at others with the late 17th century. It could of course be both, depending on the area of focus. Still it would have been good to have had an outline of the direction of travel. And of course there is the problem which affects all micro-histories of how much can be generalised from a single source, however detailed it is. Whittle and Griffiths compare where they can with other gentry families in East Anglia. As they admit, some of the patterns they find suggest that the Le Stranges were unusual. In their introduction the authors say that the sub-field they were less interested in was the history of the gentry. But given the specificity of the sources, I would have thought this book might be most revealing for historians of the provincial elite. The success of using household accounts to highlight the role of consumption in reproducing local social relationships, and the effects of the Civil War on this, suggests that

this is an approach that could be profitably pursued by others. *The World of Alice Le Strange* clearly demonstrates that gentry households can be used to examine many aspects of consumption. Specialists in early modern material culture, the household, gender and the gentry could all learn a lot from this book.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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