Three Fifteenth-Century Vowesses

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From the fourteenth century to the Dissolution of the monasteries, names survive of women who chose a life containing elements of both religious and lay states. This life was elected, for the most part though not entirely, by widows: it constitutes the familiar ‘mantle and ring’ of medieval literature. The term which such women most often use to describe themselves, beginning in the late fifteenth century is ‘vowess’, and the significant vow was one of perpetual chastity. Like nuns, vowesses were clothed and veiled at an episcopal ceremony; unlike nuns, these women did not promise either poverty or obedience. Indeed their state remained formally a lay one, with physical freedom to come and go, and economic freedom to dispose what were sometimes considerable holdings of land or goods. The vow did not imply a rule of life, like that of a third order, and no particular spiritual regimen was specified. Though some vowesses affiliated with communities of religious women, others did not.

Before examining the form which the vowess vocation assumed in three London lives, some general consideration of its nature will be useful. The vowing ceremony is preserved in several pontificals,¹ among them a London volume owned by Thomas Bele, who served as suffragan to Cuthbert Tunstall between 1522 and 1530.² Its rubrics specify that at a ceremony preceding the Gospel at mass, the woman should approach the seated bishop, wearing ordinary dress, carrying dark clothing over her left arm and led by two honest

¹ Contemporary pontificals which provide the service include that of Edmund Lacy, bishop of Exeter, 1420-55, and Christopher Bainbridge, archbishop of York, 1508-14. Several other women discussed in this volume were also vowesses. The Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers, for instance, gives Elizabeth de Burgh an indult to enter houses of the Minoresses ‘she having made a vow of chastity’ (iii, p. 113); see also the essays in this volume by Carole Rawcliffe and Kay Lacey. I am grateful to Caroline Barron for long-continued and invaluable assistance in examining both the vowess vocation and individual vowess lives.

men of her relationship. Kneeling, she first placed the paper with her vow 
(cedula professionis) at the bishop’s feet, then read the vow from it. If illiterate 
she might be helped by the bishop who led her in reading it (vel si illiterate fuerit 
episcopo docente sic dicat). Then she marked the document with a cross upon 
the seated bishop’s knee and gave him the paper for safe-keeping.

The words of profession, whether in French or English – and even the 
vowess's mark – were sometimes copied by the scribe into the episcopal 
register. Use of the mark should not be regarded as unequivocal evidence of 
illiteracy. It has been suggested that in various contexts the mark’s invocation 
of the holy cross signalled the signer's piety and that it was in fact equivalent to 
an oath, and documents survive which are both signed and marked.3

The ceremony proceeded with an episcopal blessing and aspersing, first of 
the clothes, then of the ring, with which the woman was then invested. Vowess 
clothing seems to have been indistinguishable from that of widows. Besides the 
veil, mantle and ring mentioned in the rite, the widow’s wimple was worn – 
often, though not always, in its pleated form, the barbe.4

Mass resumed with the offertory, and at the mass’s end the woman received 
the bishop’s blessing and kissed his ring. When women of elevated status made 
profession, the registers sometimes recorded the names of official witnesses or 
note-worthy guests. The ceremony’s location was most often the chapel of an 
episcopal manor. It was sometimes preceded, at some distance in time, by an 
examination – or at least by some assessment of the prospective vowess's 
suitability, set in motion by the ecclesiastical authority.

Some women’s vows mention the rule of St Paul the Apostle. The reference 
is to 1 Timothy 5:3-16, written in the early second century, though no longer 
thought to be composed by St Paul. This text describes an order of widows 
whose members were to devote themselves to a life of prayer in this 
ecclesiastically recognized vocation. Most commentators believe that a formal 
vow of enrolment is suggested by the passage.5

The conventional and traditional nature of this vocation is illustrated by 
evidence, based on the ordo’s frequent appearance in pontificals, that it was 
ecclesiastically sanctioned, and by the ceremony’s resemblances to female 
religious profession. Like a nun’s profession, in fact, the vow was a public one,

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3 For discussion of cross-marks, Samuel Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact 
abjuration of heresy, for instance, which is both signed and marked, ‘In witness whereof . . . I have 
subscribed my name and sette the signe of the crosse. Gelen Vanbellaer +’, *Lollards and 

4 Muriel Claydon, *Catalogue of Rubbings of Brasses in the Victoria and Albert Museum* 

5 The literature on the subject of early Christian widows is substantial. An overview is provided 
by Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN, 1976); more 
recent and more specific is Bonnie Bowman Thurston’s clear summary, *The Widows: A Women’s 
Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis, MN, 1989). See also Jouette M. Bassler, ‘The Widow’s 
accepted by the church's representative in the name of the institution; hence papal permission was necessary in order to dispense from it. The Calendar of Papal Letters, which records such appeals to Rome, affords the best glimpse of failed vows. Occasionally, female motives are revealed: in requesting to be freed from their vow some women cite the desire to be mothers, while other petitions reveal that occasionally birth had already occurred.

For the great majority of women who remained under their vows, however, motives varied as widely as did those underlying female religious profession. In some cases husbands' wills promised specific economic benefit if the wife vowed chastity. Even when such particular inducement was not present, the vow offered the opportunity for female control of temporal resources, free from male intrusion in the form of pressure to remarry. Secular advantage could include the maintenance of inheritance patterns as well. Spiritually the vow of chastity placed the woman in a state which, though less valued than virginity, was more elevated than the marital one. In some instances widows' literature of counsel recognises a tradition of vowed widowhood, semi-secluded and prayerful. Finally, though some vowed women lived with or near nuns' communities, for others the maintenance of domestic life provided a psychologically satisfying continuum which, at the same time, acknowledged a fresh direction.

The three vowed London widows discussed here lived at the opening, the middle, and the end of the fifteenth century. The earliest of these women, Alice Lynne, was married to a wealthy woolman and grocer; some records of his business ventures survive.

Her reasons for taking the vow are very clear: William Lynne's 1421 will left her his quay and messuage called the Wool Wharf, and also lands and tenements in three London parishes, for life as long as she remained

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7 In 1419 Edynna Clerck stated that she was still young and desired to be a mother (Calendar of Papal Letters, vii, p. 120) and in 1482 Margaret Singleton had had offspring after her vow of chastity (CPL, xii, pt 2, pp. 835-36); both quoted in Thomson, pp. 106, 113.

8 In 1405, after shipwreck of Lynne's wool cargo, the Dover customs officials were ordered to allow him to reload and take the wool to the Calais staple without a second customs payment. Calendar of Close Rolls, 1402-5, pp. 427-28. Eight years later a vessel of Lynne's was taken at sea by a Calais ship and brought to Sandwich; the order for release of the vessel is recorded in 1413. CCR, 1413-19, pp. 16-17. See also CCR, 1403-9, pp. 263, 359; CCR, 1409-13, p. 201; Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 1413-37, pp. 63, 86.

The Lynnes were apparently from Kent, since William's will leaves money for repair of Rochester Bridge, and one of the supervisors of his will was William Sevenoke, grocer, mayor in 1418, of Sevenoaks, Kent.
unmarried.9 The Lynnes’ five children were all under age at their father’s death and the wife’s response was not long delayed. The will is dated 6 August 1421; on 31 October Alice Lynne vowed chastity before Henry Chichele, archbishop of Canterbury, in the chapel of his manor of Lambeth.10

Though Alice Lynne’s subsequent career shows her as well off, some cash shortage perhaps necessitated the widow’s and executors’ pledge, nearly a year after William Lynne’s death, that the five children’s patrimony which totalled £1,750 would be paid in two years. When it was received in January and March 1424, guardianship of her two sons was given to Alice, of her two daughters Alice and Margaret to Thomas Catworth (later mayor 1443–44), and of her daughter Beatrice to William Trymne, mercer.11 These negotiations in the mayor’s court, which show the widow as a functioning member of London’s governing class, were common to all three vowesses, as we shall see.

Memorandum that on the last day of October A.D. 1421, Alice Lynne, widow of the city of London, before the lord [archbishop] in his chapel in his manor of Lambeth celebrating high mass, took a solemn vow of chastity according to a certain schedule of parchment which the same Alice held in her hands then and read the contents, of which schedule the tenor follows and is such.

I, Alice Lynne widowe a vowe to god perpetuel chastite of my body fro yis tyme forwardth in presence of you righteousful fader in god, Harry by ye grace of god Archebishopp of Cantirbury, and I behete to lyve stavely in yis avowe, and yerto with myne owne [hand] I make yis subscripcon.

Fig. 11 Alice Lynne’s vow of perpetual chastity. (Lambeth Palace Library, Register of Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury 1414-43, f. 343v).

9 PRO, PROB 11/2B, ff. 189v and 202v-204, made 6 August 1421, proved 4 December. The will was also proved in the court of Husting, but not until over two years after Lynne’s death, 23 November 1423, HW, 152 (20), p. 433. Of wills proved both in PCC and the court of Husting, see E.F. Jacob, ed., The Register of Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1414-1443, 4 vols., Canterbury & York Society (Oxford, 1937-47), ii, p. xv, who says ‘the testators are mostly of the highest municipal standing’.

10 Ibid., iv, p. 221.

11 LBI, pp. 268-69; LBK, pp. 25-27, 171.
Before his death William and Alice Lynne had purchased together a house variously called ‘le Wollewharf’ or ‘le Weynghous’, where the compulsory weighing of wool for duty assessment (tronage) took place. Situated on ‘le Newe Wool Wharf’ off the present Lower Thames Street, the house was used for ‘the convenience of the customers [customs employees], controllers, clerks, and other officers’. In return the crown granted a fee of four pounds yearly to the owners of the customs house, and in 1423, two years after William’s death, Alice received this grant.  

Fifteen years later, in 1438, it was renewed in the names of Alice Lynne and her son John, and one more renewal was extended in 1462, though at this time the grant was made simply to Alice Lynne, her heirs and assigns.

This house on the river lay only two blocks south of Alice Lynne’s dwelling, a tenement in Mincing Lane. She was occupying her home still in 1470, when a contemporary document describes a property as lying ‘between the tenement of Dame Alice Lynne on the north and the tenement late of Thomas Horsham on the south’ in the parish of St Dunstan in the East. Her very long widowhood extended in fact until the end of this decade: her will, made in 1458, was not proved until 6 October 1480. It is solely concerned to dispose the properties in which she held a life interest and which, after her death, her husband William’s will had specified should support a chantry.

During these years Alice Lynne’s enviable financial position is confirmed by her appearance in the 1436 London lay subsidy roll. Among fourteen women identified as London widows, the richest, Margaret Berkeley, had an estimated income of £160 yearly, while Alice Lynne stood fourth in this group with £43 annually.

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12 A new building for the weighing of wool was erected on the site by John Churchman in 1382, with an addition in 1383. CPR, 1380-85, pp. 149, 299. The freehold passed to a group perhaps representative of the Grocers’ Company, one of whom was John Shadworth from whom the Lynnes acquired it. London County Council, Survey of London, xv, The Parish of All Hallows Barking, pt 2 (London, 1934), pp. 33-34. Alice Lynne’s 1423 grant is CPR, 1422-29, pp. 142-43. Excavations at the site in 1973 revealed what were probably the foundations both of Churchman’s original building and his addition containing ‘a small chamber for a latrine and a sollar’. It is an interesting thought that the most famous controller of customs, Geoffrey Chaucer, may have used this latrine, Tim Tatton-Brown, Excavations at the Custom House Site City of London, 1973, Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, 25 (1974), pp. 117-219, the reference is on p. 141.

13 CPR, 1436-41, pp. 225-26, 231.

14 CPR, 1461-67, p. 92. John Lynne was still living, since his name appears on a manorial grant in 1464 (ibid., p. 323). See also LBL, p. 58, where he is party to a bond in March 1465.

15 CPR, 1458-82, pp. 65-66.

16 HW, ii, p. 580; roll 210 (13).

17 Sylvia Thrupp, The Merchant Class of Medieval London (Chicago, 1948), appendix B. In 1412, about ten years before his death while his career was still on the rise, William Lynne’s income from land in London had been assessed at 40s. annually. J.C.L. Stahlschmidt, ‘London Subsidy temp. Henry IV’, Archaeological Journal, 44 (1887), pp. 56-82.
Perhaps the most intriguing element in Alice Lynne’s life is her connection with John Shirley, the well-known scribe and bibliophile. A.I. Doyle has shown, through Shirley’s will with its appointment of ‘my benyngne Moder in Lawe Dame Alice Lynne Widow’ as an overseer, that Shirley’s second wife was Alice Lynne’s daughter Margaret. Doyle dates the marriage before 1441. It is likely to have taken place after 1428 when, with his employer Richard Beauchamp, earl of Warwick, Shirley returned to England from Calais. Since 1414 Beauchamp had been captain of Calais where Shirley served as his secretary, and Calais may have provided the connection between the wool-trading Lynne family and the book-loving, book-circulating Shirley. In addition, Alice Lynne’s grant of royal fees from the customs house indicates that she continued to move in the same world as Shirley, who was appointed in February 1432 as controller of the subsidy of tunnage and poundage, this appointment being replaced in March by an appointment as controller of the petty custom.  

Margaret Lynne Shirley’s name remains in a notable manuscript of Hoccleve’s and Lydgate’s work (Huntington Library, MS EL 26.A.13) where Shirley has lettered together the names ‘Margarete & Beautrice’ above his own. Beatrice Lynne, Margaret’s sister, married Avery Cornburgh, a career official who rose to become keeper of the great wardrobe. Beatrice outlived her husband: her inscription survives in a fifteenth-century psalter which she gave to Dame Grace Centurio of the London Minories, and after her death to the use of the house.

Alice Lynne’s third daughter, another Alice, seems to have possessed unusual qualities of loyalty and strength. In 1430 she married John Knyvett: one of their daughters was Christian, wife of Henry and mother of John Colet. In a protracted inheritance struggle which recalls the Pastons’ difficulties over the Fastolf will, Alice Lynne Knyvett and her husband claimed their right to Buckenham Castle in Norfolk. On one occasion Alice refused entry to the royal commissioners. With fifty men she raised the drawbridge asserting ‘I woll

19 Huntington Library, San Marino, MS EL 26.A.13 also bears Avery Cornburgh’s name, see Guide to Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Huntington Library (San Marino, CA, 1989), 1, pp. 35-39. The psalter is described in Margaret M. Manion, Vera F. Vines and Christopher de Hamel, ed., *Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in New Zealand Collections* (Melbourne and New York, 1989), no. 135. Beatrice Cornburgh’s 1501 will is PRO, PROB 11/15, f. 56v–v. In it she leaves Dame Christian Colet, wife of Henry Colet, knight, ‘my cowyne’ (i.e. her niece, see note following) her best black gown furred with marten and her girdle of black harnessed with gold. The overseer and supervisor is Master John Colet, D.D., parish priest of Stebenheth (Stepney). Grace Centurio does not appear in the Minories’ pension list at the Dissolution.
nott leve the possession of this castell to dye theryfore. . . . lever I had in such wyse to dye than to be slayne when my husbond cometh home, for he charget me to kepe it'.

While Alice Lynne took the vow of chastity early, and after only a single marriage, the career of Joan Godney, in both its marital and financial aspects, exhibits a more complex character and a more ambitious scope. Married four times as her 1462 will shows, she took the vow after her third marriage to Robert Large, the mayor of London, and broke it to marry John Godney, whose London and career and honours echo Large's.

Cloth-trade networks perhaps underlie at least her last three marriages. Although nothing is known about her first husband, John Gade, save for his mention in her will, her second, Richard Turnaut, a fuller, was M.P. for Winchester five times beginning in 1416, and was twice mayor of the city. Derek Keene calls him 'one of the wealthiest Winchester clothiers of his day'. Keene's work allows us to see him amassing an estate of seven properties and to locate these precisely. Cash legacies in his 1433 will amounted to over £400.

He and Joan Gade were married at least by 1427, as their son Richard was born in 1428. Like Joan's subsequent husbands, Turnaut must have been considerably older than his wife, since he had been previously married between 1410 and 1417 to Juliana, widow of Gilbert Forster, another Winchester clothier through whom Turnaut acquired substantial property.

Nothing is known of Joan from 1433 until she appears in the 1441 will of her subsequent husband Robert Large, London mercer, mayor, M.P., and perhaps best-known as William Caxton's master.

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21 Derek Keene, *Survey of Medieval Winchester*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1985), i, p. 161. Turnaut's career is summarised, ibid., ii, p. 1371. Of the many references to Turnaut in these volumes the following are particularly interesting: i, pp. 132, 161, 218, 224, 227, 307, 418; ii, pp. 792-93.

By her first husband, John Gade, Joan had a daughter, Denise, who was remembered in Turnaut's will. For this information and knowledge of Turnaut's previous marriage I am indebted to Dr Linda Clark who generously allowed me to see her biography of Turnaut before publication: *The History of Parliament: The Commons*, 1386-1421, ed. J.S. Roskell, L.S. Clark and C. Rawcliffe, 4 vols (Gloucester, 1992), iv, pp. 675-76. For Richard Turnaut the younger's birthdate, see Daniel Lyons, *Environments of London*, 4 vols (London, 1792-96), iii, p. 526, n. 61, who says that at his mother's death in 1462 Turnaut was thirty-four.

22 Robert Large's will is PRO, PROB 11/1, ff. 120v-121v and 145. It is incomplete, breaking off at the bottom of f. 121v and concluding on f. 145. It was printed and translated by William Blades, continued
of 4,000 marks in lieu of her legal one-third of Large's estate and was named one of the executors. If dissatisfied, she was to have only the portion to which she was legally entitled. Richard Turnaunt, Large's stepson, received a legacy of twenty pounds. (For comparison, Large left his apprentice William Caxton twenty marks.)

Large died in April 1441.23 His widow took the vow of chastity sometime between her husband's death and 13 August 1442 when Letter Book K refers to her as domina (English 'dame'). The records' editor, Reginald Sharpe, observed that since Large was neither knight nor baronet 'the title of domina, here applied to his widow, is somewhat strange',24 but clearly its use means that Joan Large vowed sometime in this fifteenth-month period. Search of the relevant episcopal register, that of Robert Gilbert, bishop of London, for 1436-49 (GL, MS 9531/6), and of the register (1414-43) of Henry Chichele, archbishop of Canterbury, has not uncovered the document, but the detailed form of words provided by William Blades, Caxton's biographer, indicates that he saw it:

I, Johanna, that was sometime the wife of Robert Large, make mine avow to God and the high blissful Trinity, to our Lady Saint Mary, and to all the blissful company of Heaven, to live in chastity and cleanness of my body from this time forward as long as my life lasteth, and never to take other spouse but only Christ Jesu.25

The scandal of Joan Large's broken vow and remarriage is first recorded in Bodleian Digby Roll 2, a London chronicle, where it appears under the year of Thomas Catworth's mayoralty, 1443-44:

Also in this year John Gedney, draper alderman of London [omission] which was Robert Large wife late mayor of London which was sworn chaste and had take the mantel and the ring and should have kept her a godly widow time of her life. And anon after the marriage done they were troubled by holy church because of breaking of her oath and were put to penance both he and she.26

John Stow likewise records these events, in terms so similar as to suggest his dependence on Digby Roll 2, and the story is found again in the eighteenth-

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23 Although Beaven gives the death date as 24 April 1441, the date of the will's making was 11 April, and in 1459 a writer of the court hand, Robert Bale, testified that he had made a copy of 'the last will of the said Robert Large dictated the day before he died' (CPMR, 1458-82, p. 9). If this is correct, Large died on 12 April.
24 LBK, p. 273n.
25 Blades, Caxton, p. 11.
26 Caroline Barron provided the chronicle reference, knowledge of Joan Gedney's will and references to her in the Letter Books. Thomas Catworth was guardian of Alice Lynne's daughters Alice and Margaret.
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century antiquarian William Cole’s collections (now BL, MS Add. 5808). Since London mayors were both elected and inaugurated in October, Joan Large married John Gedney between October 1443 and October 1444.

She had taken the vow of chastity soon after Large’s death, as Alice Lynne did after her husband William died, and their reasons too may resemble each other. Though only the final paragraph of Large’s real estate bequests survives, later legal records reveal that, like Lynne’s bequest to Alice, Large left Joan his Essex manorial lands on condition she remain unmarried.

Here, as in Alice Lynne’s case, the vow was evidently felt to stabilise a potentially volatile situation. Once vowed, the woman would retain an unchangeable legal/eclesiastical status for the rest of her life, one which offered no challenge to the husband’s testamentary desires. The troubling possibility of female remarriage with the complexities of additional children, or at the very least with the attendant need to redevote land or property, would be eliminated.

Robert and Joan Large had no children together. After his death guardianship of his son Robert went to Thomas Staunton, one of Large’s executors, while, as his will specified, Joan assumed guardianship of his sons Thomas and Richard, each of whose patrimonies of £1,000 she held and gave legal surety for in the mayor’s court. Robert and Thomas were dead by 1448, and in 1452 Large’s remaining son, Richard, now aged twenty-four, acknowledged receiving from Joan his patrimony of £1,000 and legacies consequent on the death of his brothers. By 1450 Richard was in possession of his father’s Essex property – the lands which had been left to Joan if she did not remarry – since he was party to a bond in that year which identifies him as ‘Richard Large of Thaxted, Essex, esquire’. Weever records the 27 March 1458 tomb inscription of a Richard Large at Thaxted, Essex, and cites a tradition that the dead man was brother to the London mayor.

That this was Large’s last surviving son, however, is made clear by Thomas Staunton’s claim in the following year, 1459, to this manor left him by Large consequent on the death of all Large’s children.

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28 For mayoral year, see Beaven, *Aldermen*, ii, p. xxviii; *LBK*, p. 280.

29 *CPMR*, 1458-82, p. 9. The manor, called in the document Horham, and glossed by its editor ‘Horham Hall, near Thaxted’, had been devised by Large to Joan for life, as long as she remained unmarried, with remainder to his sons.

30 For these transactions during the ten years after Large’s death from 1442 to 1452, see *LBK*, pp. 272-73, 279, 280 (two entries), 281 (two entries), 282. Also *CPMR*, 1437-57, pp. 110, 114.

31 That this was Large’s last surviving son, however, is made clear by Thomas Staunton’s claim in the following year, 1459, to this manor left him by Large consequent on the death of all Large’s children.

32 *CCR*, 1447-54, p. 238.

Joan Large remained in the vow for about three years. In breaking this socially and ecclesiastically sanctioned public pledge, she not only incurred social and religious censure, but sustained the loss of Large’s Essex lands. Such a considerable economic loss could perhaps only have been justified by a parallel gain.

Since about 1427 John Gedney had been negotiating the acquisition of the four sub-manors which together comprised the manor of Tottenham, Middlesex. (Londoners’ purchase of Tottenham lands for investment had begun as early as John of Northampton’s 1392 acquisition.) Like Large’s, Gedney’s career was an elevated one and they were personal friends, Gedney serving as one of Large’s executors. Each was master of his company, the Drapers and the Mercers respectively, and served as alderman, as M.P. for London, and as mayor (Gedney twice). Gedney died in 1449; his will does not survive.33

Douglas Moss has traced the immense changes which Gedney’s tenure brought to Tottenham. Surpluses of over £100 per year are continuous in all surviving accounts between 1443 and 1449. These years saw the building of first one fulling mill and then a second, to join the older water mill; sales of hay supplementing earlier sales of timber; and the operation of a brickworks. Gedney raised rents, leased the demesne either in one piece or in large parcels, and in summary, treated the manor like ‘a business run for profit’.34

Reference to ‘Joan Large widow’ in some Tottenham conveyances indicates she too was involved with the ownership of these Middlesex lands before 1443-44,

33 For the most recent and most inclusive summary of Gedney’s career, see Carole Rawcliffe’s biography in The History of Parliament: The Commons, 1386-1421, iii, pp. 170-73. Dr Rawcliffe kindly let me see her work before publication.

Gedney’s appearance in the notable stained-glass of Long Melford church, Suffolk, is explained by his earlier marriage to Elizabeth, sister of John Clopton, the man responsible for this splendid assemblage of family and friends and Gedney’s executor. For Gedney’s earlier marriage, see Sir William Parker, Handbook to the . . . Glass in the Church of . . . Long Melford (Ipswich, 1888), p. 29.

Arrangements for Gedney’s chantry in St Christopher le Stocks where he was buried were not completed until 5 February 1483, when one John Plonket, shearmen, composed a document headed ‘The testament of John Plonket Sherman of the lands and tenements for the Sowle of John Gedney etc to the ayed of the dead bequeathed’. Acting at the special request and instance of John Clopton Esquier Executor’, he specifies the lands and tenements which will support the chantry. The document concludes with a description of the ceremonial confirmation of these arrangements, held 14 February at St Christopher’s in the presence of various named drapers, Wills, Leases and Memoranda in the Book of Records of the Parish of St Christopher le Stocks, ed. Edwin Freshfield (London, 1895), pp. 9-12. In this document Gedney’s wives are specified as Alice, Elizabeth and Joan; a son, John, is also named.

34 ‘The Economic Development of a Middlesex Village’, Agricultural History Review, 28 (1980), pp. 104-14. Further evidence is provided in Douglas Moss and Ian Murray, Signs of Change in a Medieval Village Community, Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, 27 (1976), pp. 280-87; the quoted phrase is on p. 286. Turnaunt was likewise a clothier-entrepreneur, though on a smaller scale than Gedney. He held the fulling-mill at Easton at farm from the cathedral priory in 1430; compare Gedney’s building of two fulling-mills in the 1440s.
when she married Gedney and took his name. Lysons reports that at the sub-manor of Bruses, the first manorial court of Joan Large, widow, was held in 1444, and later the same year, the court of John Gedney and Joan his wife.\(^{35}\) Although the complex land transfers of various feoffee groups make assignment of actual ownership difficult, if Joan Large was indeed lady of the manor of Bruses and John Gedney was enfeoffed of the remaining sub-manors, union of their Middlesex interests may have represented possibilities even more substantial than those Large and Turnaunt had left her. Gedney’s wealth was, in fact, greater than Large’s: for instance in the 1436 lay subsidy Gedney’s assessment was £120, Large’s £15.\(^{36}\)

After Gedney’s death in 1449, the Tottenham lands went to a group of six feoffees of whom Joan was one. In the following decade her continuing efforts to acquire these manors for herself were notable. In 1451, 1455 and finally 1458 she negotiated a series of quit-claims which gradually left the whole manor in her possession for life. In this decade, when the manor’s ownership was in more or less constant transition, Moss notes that three surviving accounts show the manorial surplus falling somewhat and large arrears reappearing. ‘Even so, much was being spent on repairs to the fulling mills and on a new oven for the brickworks, – decisions in which Joan Gedney must have played a part. After the final 1458 release to her she commissioned a terrier or rent-roll of all the Tottenham lands in 1459. Here she is styled lady of the entire manor (her will left the parish church of Tottenham the appropriately large sum of £10).\(^{37}\)

Upon her death in 1462 the lands passed to her son Richard Turnaunt, and then to Joan’s granddaughter Thomasina Turnaunt and her husband Sir John Risley, where they facilitated Risley’s career as a Middlesex J.P. and courtier to Henry VII.\(^{38}\) This formation of the estate is recalled in one of the transactions of the 1480s, which specifies that the lands may eventually be sold and the purchase money distributed in works of piety for the souls of Thomasina and John Risley, Richard Turnaunt and Elizabeth his wife, and Joan Gedney.\(^{39}\) Thomasina’s grandmother is thus recognised as responsible for the acquisition of substantial familial wealth and security.

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\(^{36}\) Trupp, *Merchant Class*, pp. 381-82.


\(^{38}\) For the grant to Richard Turnaunt and his wife Joan, daughter of John Stokton, Mayor of London, dated 17 August 1462, CCR, 1461-68, pp. 118-19. Richard and Joan had to sue her father (PRO, C 128550) and received a quitclaim from him 23 March 1464 (CCR, 1461-68, p. 241).

In 1512, failing direct heirs, the lands escheated to the crown. The family of John Gedney had held the manor since about 1427, approximately eighty-five years. In this narrative of determined entrepreneurship we may recognise not only Gedney's administrative skill but also the role played by Joan Large's broken vow, her marriage to Gedney, and her own decade-long effort in the 1450s to acquire Tottenham for herself and her own descendants.

During the years of her final widowhood, two further examples demonstrate the extent of her wealth. She was one of a group of distinguished people, including the archbishop of Canterbury, to whom a royal loan was repaid in 1451; in her case the amount was £200. In the year of her death, 1462, she was receiving annual payments on a large debt of £236, money owed her originally by Thomas Eyre, probably the husband of Large's daughter Elizabeth.  

In her will, which left over £500 in money bequests, she remembered particularly her only grandchild, the two-year-old heiress Thomasina, who on her marriage was to receive 600 marks, half Joan's jewelry and napery, and other valuables. She directed her son to give security for these in the mayor's court (as she herself had done for the patrimony of Large's sons). The same tendency which Alice Brice's will shows to control legatees' behaviour through gifts is illustrated in Joan's stipulation that if Thomasina married against her advisers' wishes she should receive only as much of her legacies as father and advisers thought appropriate, the rest to be disposed in pious works.

Joan Gedney requested burial in St Christopher le Stocks with her last husband. She designated 100 marks for a priest to pray for her soul and those of her first three husbands, for ten years. Interestingly, her tenement 'le ledenporche' which fronted on Threadneedle Street, was next to the tenement of an earlier vowess, Margery de Nerford (d. 1417), also a parishioner of St Christopher's. 

continued

six; hence at her grandmother's death she would have been only two. Virgoe discovered that Thomasina was alive in 1505, dead by 1507. Risley, seventeen years older than she, died in 1512. Thomasina had been first married to Richard Charlton, probably the son of their Tottenham neighbour Sir Thomas Charlton. The History and Antiquities of the Parish of Tottenham, H.G. Oldfield and R.R. Dyson (London, 1790), p. 47. In 1474 Risley and Thomasina, then fourteen, sued Charlton for return of Joan Gedney's bequests, conferred at the marriage. Particularly mentioned, both in suit and will, was a covered cup of Paris gold weighing 26 ounces, worth over £47. (PRO, C 1/66/286-87). The accompanying list of gifts Richard Turnaunt gave Thomasina at her wedding includes a woman's saddle covered with red velvet and harnessed with copper and gilt, price £5. Acknowledgement of Joan Gedney's role in acquisition of the Middlesex lands appears in CPR, 1485-94, pp. 228-29.

40 CPR, 1446-52, p. 452. The suit for debt, PRO, C 1/29/455, offers a personal glimpse of Joan as the debtors, Richard Quatermayns and William Hampton, who assumed the debt of Thomas Eyre, visited her at Candelmas 1462 and were told the document was with one of her servants 'not then present'. She died probably at the beginning of July.

41 Joan Gedney's will is GL, MS 9171/5, f. 326v, made 28 June, proved 10 July 1462. In it the Tottenham lands are referred to as 'Herber', the name of a section of them sometimes used for the whole. For locations of both tenements, Margery de Nerford's 'Worm on the Hoop' and Joan Gedney's 'Le Ledenporche', see H.L. Hopkinson, 'Ancient Bradestrete Identical with Threadneedle Street', London Topographical Record, 13 (1923), pp. 23-28.
The career of Alice Brice, widow and ‘avowes’ as she calls herself in her 1499 will, although less sensational resembles Joan Gedney’s at some points. She married three times, the last time to London sheriff Henry Brice, and was firmly situated in this upper-class world. Her first husband Roger Steynour is known only from mention in her will, but her second, John Crichefeld, was a skinner who died in 1454. By Crichefeld, to whom she was married at least by 1445, she had two children. Her son John Crichefeld was renter warden of the Goldsmiths’ Company in 1486/87 and died in that year, making her his sole executor. The language of his will is perhaps uncharacteristically intimate. After a very few bequests he leaves the residue of his estate to ‘Dame Alice Brice my mother of whom I had the substance of my goods and my upmaking’, and he asks that she dispose of his goods in works of charity and mercy ‘as she would that I would do for her in like case’. This latter formulation is frequently found, but ‘upmaking’ is an unusual word for which O.E.D. gives only physical examples from the construction trades. By analogy, John Crichefeld seems here to recognise his mother’s nurturing role in his own formation.

Alice Brice’s relation with her other Crichefeld child, her daughter Alice, provides some insights into female religious life at the end of the fifteenth century. In her will the vowess leaves a silver and parcel gilt basin valued at £5 to Halliwell nunnery ‘where my daughter Alice is a nun professed’, if the prioress and convent there ‘suffer my said daughter Alice to have the reason-able occupation of the said basin as long as she shall live and be abiding within the said place’. Alice Crichefeld had been at Halliwell at least since 1462, in which year, aged fifteen and a half, she and prioress Joan Sevenok appeared before the mayor’s court in the Guildhall to acknowledge receipt of Alice’s patrimony. Hence Alice’s birthdate was 1446; in the year of her mother’s will, 1499, she would have been fifty-three. The conditional nature of her mother’s bequests, in consequence, is somewhat surprising. The will mentions ‘certain plate which she [Alice Crichefeld] hath of mine in keeping’ which is now given to her outright ‘as long as she dwells in the said place’. If she leaves Halliwell, the plate is designated for Alice Brice’s other daughter, Joan. Again, all the mother’s lands and tenements in the parish of St Nicholas Acon

42 PRO, PROB 11/11, f. 238r–v, made 15 February, proved 4 March 1499.
43 His will, PRO, PROB 11/1, f. 86v, names as executors his wife Alice and John Cole, who was later to hold the office of King’s Skinner beginning in 1461; see Elspeth M. Veale, The English Fur Trade in the Later Middle Ages (Oxford, 1966), p. 207. That Crichefeld was young is suggested by the rather modest amounts (£10 each) which he left his two children, but he employed the standard form, specifying that the £20 should remain with Cole ‘under sufficient surety as the manner and form is for the ward of orphans’.
44 PRO, PROB 11/8, f. 79Ar–v, made 29 September, proved 8 October 1487. At some point, probably between 1483 and 1485, John Crichefeld brought an action of trespass against Alice, wife of John King, grocer, for complaining to the chamberlains of London about his treatment of her son, his apprentice (PRO, C 1/66/215).
45 Although LBL in 1462 calls her ‘a nun of Halliwell’ (p. 8), she is listed as a novice in the prioress’s election of 1472, at which time she would have been twenty-six (GL., MS 9531/7, f. 5v, Register Thomas Kempe 1450-89). Seven nuns and ten novices were present.
are to go to Joan on condition that she pay yearly to Alice 53s. 4d. (13s. 4d quarterly) as long as Alice remains at Halliwell. Should she leave, her annual income would be reduced by half. Much as we would like to know whether this method of financial control succeeded, the next prioress was not elected until 1534, when Alice Crichefeld’s name does not appear.

The vowess’s ability to act within the legal system, suggested by her probable role in paying her daughter Alice’s patrimony, is witnessed by the record of a chancery suit in which she appears between 1475 and 1485. Two complainants state they agreed to purchase from Alice Brice three pieces of broad cloth, price £21, though the ‘acqueyntance’ of Sir Hugh Montague, chaplain. Though they assert they paid the debt, part to Alice and part to Sir Hugh, the latter had fled the country ‘for divers faults’ and Alice was suing them in the mayor’s court for the whole sum.46

This wealthy vowess thus maintained some involvement in trade. Her third husband’s civic career had been cut short by his death in 1467 while serving as sheriff; he left her £1,000 in his will and his (or their) children Henry and Joan Brice received £500 and 500 marks respectively.57 The son is not mentioned in Alice Brice’s will but, like her half-sister Alice Crichefeld, Joan appears in her mother’s will in a fashion remarkably personal.

After specifying the usual honest priest who will pray for her soul (in this case for three years at a salary of ten marks a year), Alice Brice continues: ‘And I will that the said priest shall be attending upon my son in law Henry Kebell and my daughter Johane his wife upon their reasonable desire when they ride or go on pilgrimage or into the country upon their sporting or my daughter lying in childbed and other times convenient’. She adds: ‘the said priest always praying for my soul and other souls aforesaid’.

That this attempt to bequeath services was not peculiar to Alice Brice is shown by the 1488 London will of Richard Gardener, who stipulates ‘prouided allwey that if my seid wyfe for a moneth or ij in the yere be owte of the Cite of London Than if she wyll the seid priest assigned to syng In the church of seint Bartholomew aforesaid shall awayte/vpon hyr for the seid tyme/Soo alweys that he pray and syng for my sowle and other sowles aforesaid . . .58 In

46 PRO, C 1/64/962. Alice told Sir Hugh she had ‘noo trust nor confidence’ in the two complainants and refused to make an obligation with them directly, insisting that Sir Hugh also be involved.

57 For Brice’s career, Beaven Aldermen, ii, p. xxxix; Thrupp, Merchant Class, p. 326, under Hugh Brice. His will is PRO, PROB 11/5, f. 153v-154v.

58 See Kristine G. Bradberry, ‘The World of Etheldreda Gardener’, The Ricardian, 9 (1991), pp. 146-53, esp. p. 14. Richard Gardener’s will reference, PRO, PROB 11/8, f. 277-280v, comes from Caroline Barron. Perhaps Gardener’s and Brice’s wills should be compared with other wills which stipulate that their chantry priests shall assist with parish work and services, thus enriching and diversifying parish religious life, though they nevertheless suggest the perception that chantry priests had considerable unoccupied time.

Since Joan Brice Kebell was born before 1467, when she was mentioned in her father’s will, she must in 1499 have been at least thirty-two (probably slightly older), so childbirth would certainly have been a possibility.
thus disposing their clerical employees' time both Richard Gardener and Alice Brice were pursuing traditional testamentary aims: to protect and serve those left behind.

Henry Kebell’s career was a flourishing one: lieutenant of the staple of Calais in 1485, elected four times as master of the Grocers’ Company beginning in 1502, alderman continuously for fifteen years beginning in that year, sheriff in 1502-03, and mayor in 1510-11.\textsuperscript{49} The wealth displayed in his 1517 will (PCC 30 Holder) which lists properties in Warwickshire, Northamptonshire, Kent and Oxfordshire, recalls Alice Brice’s provision for him and her daughter Joan ‘when they ride . . . into the country upon their sporting’. Kebell’s magnificence is remembered particularly through his £1,000 gift for the rebuilding of St Mary Aldermary, although Stow notes that his bones were not allowed to rest there but were moved in 1545 to make room for two later mayors.\textsuperscript{50}

The vowed life was familiar at the highest level of London’s mercantile elite. Though all these women were connected with wealthy cloth-trade merchants,\textsuperscript{51} perhaps particular guild membership is less important than the level of economic activity it reveals. No characteristic pattern emerges in the relation of marriage and vow. Alice Lynne married once, took the vow in response to her husband’s initiative, and lived as a vowess for almost all her adult life—nearly sixty years. Joan Gedney married four times but vowed after her third marriage. Her tenure as a vowess was about three years, after which she spent about five more years as a wife and thirteen as a widow. Alice Brice married three times, vowed sometime after her last husband’s death and lived the rest of her life, probably for over thirty years under the vow.

The lives of these women do not allow us to glimpse a particular spirituality. To some extent we may blame the legal and financial nature of the surviving records, though on the other hand the language of their wills and the nature of their bequests do not illustrate the fervent piety which such documents sometimes reveal.

Other contemporary London vowesses differ from them in this respect. Margery de Nerford, for instance, who died in 1417 and whose origins were


\textsuperscript{51} William Lynne, woolman and grocer; Richard Turnaunt, fuller; Robert Large, mercer; John Gedney, draper; John Crichefield, skinner; Henry Brice, fuller. In addition son-in-law Henry Kebell, though a grocer, was a merchant of the staple of Calais, as also William Lynne probably was.
somewhat more aristocratic, had a private chapel with several sets of vestments, plate and service books. During her lifetime she had commissioned a chapel in St Christopher's and in her will she expressed the wish to be buried in this chapel where she was accustomed to sit in front of the image of the Virgin. Emma Cheyne and her husband William separated, he to live as a recluse at Bury St Edmund, she to become the anchoress of St Peter Cornhill. In 1449 she was described as being 'professed for twenty-two years in the order of widowhood'.

Such ardent spirituality is nowhere in evidence here. Rather what is illustrated is the continuance of an active life as an economic agent. These women share familiarity with the legal system, and particularly with the London courts: Alice Lynne and Joan Gedney and Alice Brice all safeguarded their children's, step-children's or grandchildren's inheritances through the mayor's court. In addition Alice Lynne used this court to litigate for money belonging to her son John, while Alice Brice employed it in a trade dispute.

In addition all continued to work, to some extent, in the world of money. Alice Lynne received her annual tonnage fees, Alice Brice dealt in cloth (to how large an extent it is impossible to say), while Joan Gedney, perhaps at a higher level than either, lent money and accumulated land. Such mercantile activity seems to preclude a spiritual impetus as primary.

What then impelled these women? Despite its spiritual form, the vow might be seen as itself an element in a mercantile exchange. In some cases – certainly not in all – the woman who took the vow traded the sexual and economic possibilities inherent in future marriage for a clearly-defined present economic good. In vowing, the woman not only made a public promise to the representative of the institutional church, but a private one, by implication, to her dead husband. In return for what seems, usually, considerable economic support, she promised stasis, the absence of unsettling change – a kind of personal, rather than legal, mortmain, in which the husband’s ‘dead hand’ continued to exert its grip.

The vow of course was not only an economic bargain but also an emotional response and a religious statement. If Alice Lynne and Joan Gedney vowed in response to financial coercion, Alice Brice, in her impenetrability, makes us acknowledge the complexity of motive which must have figured in every such decision. Nevertheless, if a vowed spirituality can be traced in some women's

52 Margery de Nerford's will is printed in Edwin Freshfield, ed., Wills, Leases and Memoranda in the Book of Records of the Parish of St Christopher le Stocks (London, 1895), pp. 8-9, from GL, MS 4424.

53 For Emma Cheyne, see CPR, 1446-52, p. 304. The record of her husband's enclosure can be found in BL, MS Add. 14946, f. 79v, the register of William Curteys, abbot of Bury St Edmund. It is dated 6 March 'MCCCC vicesimo nono', i.e. 1430.

lives, it is not visible here. Instead these three well-connected, propertied women allow us to view female manipulation of legal, ecclesiastic and economic counters in an elevated urban setting.
### Table 5

**Some London Vowed Women 1367–1337**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 7 July 1376</td>
<td>Margery, widow of Thomas Broun. CLRO, HR 109 (89), her will.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week after Palm Sunday, 1387</td>
<td>Margery Ittelcote, widow. GL, MS 9531/3, f. 334v.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Aug. 1397</td>
<td>Margaret, widow of Adam Bamme, mayor of London. GL, MS 9531/3, f. 346v.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Oct. 1401</td>
<td>Alice Carill, widow. GL, MS 9531/3, f. 352v.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 June 1407</td>
<td>Alice Langhorne, widow. Form in English. Vowed before Nicholas Bubwith, bishop of London, in chapel of his dwelling in St Clement Danes. GL, MS 9531/4, f. 14v.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1427 Emma Chyne, anchoress of St Peter Cornhill, wife of William Cheyne, reclus of Bury St Edmunds. CPR, 1446–52, p. 304. ‘Professed for twenty-two years in order of widowhood’ in 1449.

Between 12 April 1441 and 13 August 1442 Joan, widow of Robert Large, mayor of London. Stow, Survey, i, p. 186; Bodleian Library, Digby Roll 2.

Between 20 June 1467 and 1499 Alice, widow of Henry Brice, sheriff of London. PRO, PROB 11/11, f. 238r–v, her will.

8 Feb. 1473, date of will Katherine Rippelingham, ‘Videwe Advowes’, widow of William Southcote. PRO, PROB 11/6, ff. 116v–117, her will.


28 March 1482 Joan, widow of Robert Byfeld, ironmonger, sheriff of London. PRO, PROB 11/7, ff. 36v–39v, his will; PROB 11/9, ff. 166–167v, her will; Cely Letters, no. 147.

1499 Margaret Beaufort, countess of Richmond and Derby. C.H. Cooper, The Lady Margaret (Cambridge, 1874), pp. 97–98.

Before 23 April 1510 Kathryn, widow of Henry Langley, esq. GL, MS 9531/9, ff. viii–x (third series).

13 July 1511 Katherine, countess of Devon, widow of William Courtenay, earl of Devon. Vowed before Richard Fitzjames, bishop of London. GL, MS 9531/9, f. 30v.

2 Dec. 1537 Margaret Raykynne, widow. Previous tenant, lease in parish of St Helen Bishopsgate, London. PRO, E303/8/16.

I am indebted to Caroline Barron for the names of Elizabeth Willford and Alice Langhorne; to Catherine Paxton for Margaret Raykynne; to Carole Rawcliffe for Margaret Bamne; to Kay Lacey for Margaret Croke.

Margery de Nerford, Alice Carlill, Elizabeth Willford (or Welford) and Alice Langhorne all appear in the 1412 London lay subsidy list, where their annual incomes are given, respectively, as £6; £5 6s. 8d.; £44 9s. 11d.; and £13 18s. 0d., J.C.L. Stahlschmidt, ‘London Subsidy temp. Henry IV’, Archaeological Journal, 44 (1887), pp. 56–82, ref. p. 64. In the subsidy of 1436 (Thrupp, Merchant Class, p. 385), Alice Carlill, £5 6s. 8d.; Elizabeth Willford, £60; Alice Lynne, £43.
2. The door of the Grammar School at Week St Mary, Cornwall, founded by Dame Thomasine Percyvale, 1508. (Woolf/Greenham Collection)