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## Economic Women

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# Gentry, Gender, and the Moral Economy during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in Provincial England



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In recent years, scholars have challenged the narratives that long shaped our perceptions of middling women and their relationship to the emerging industrial economy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In contrast to the picture painted by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, who assumed a gradual, if complicated, decline in women's capacity to function as active economic agents,<sup>1</sup> a new generation of historians has noted the continuing (and sometimes widening) economic opportunities provided for women in the expanding urban economies of the late eighteenth century, particularly in the retail and service industries.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, research has shown how women of the middling and gentry classes were able to intervene in wider civic life too, through their

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<sup>1</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Anne Laurence, Josephine Maltby, and Janette Rutterford, eds., *Women and their Money, 1700–1950* (London: Routledge, 2009); Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England, 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Penelope Lane, “Women, Property and Inheritance: Wealth Creation and Income Generation in Small English Towns, 1750–1853,” in Jon Stobart and Alastair Owens, eds., *Urban Fortunes: Property and Inheritance in the Town, 1700–1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 172–94.

contributions to philanthropic organizations and local charitable ventures.<sup>3</sup> However, as I argue in this chapter, we derive a more nuanced story of women's unfolding relationship to the new imperatives of the industrial nation by exploring how women were implicated in the functioning of the traditional "moral economy." The gradual breakdown of this customary view of the market was a critical component in the period's shifting socio-economic relationships, but one that has not hitherto been explored in the context of women of the middle and gentry classes. This essay provides a case study of one such woman and her family at the turn of the century.

In contrast to the "political economy" that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century and that advocated free-market relations, the moral economy, as defined by E. P. Thompson, was a concept rooted in paternalistic notions of the social order. Whereas the new political economy was to privilege the values of independence and self-help, the moral economy was enmeshed in older ideals of mutuality. It supposed that the market should be regulated so as to ensure the appropriate circulation of goods (particularly grain) at a just price in the local market without the interference of "middlemen." As a result, medieval legislation was often enacted during times of food shortage, such as setting the assize of bread (an agreed-upon price and quality of loaf), and prosecuting trading practices such as "engrossing" (the hoarding of grain in an attempt to enhance its market price). Higher food prices, seen as transgressions against the moral economy, often led to food riots. As such, food riots should not be seen as undisciplined, violent outbursts but were rather expressions of a sense of injustice when accepted norms of pricing and market management were contravened.<sup>4</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, the moral economy was faltering as free-trade arguments gained intellectual credence. The older notion of *oecconomy*, with its sense of the stewardship of resources based on the model of household financial management, was starting to lose its currency, and the modern concept of the "economy"—as a "self-contained and self-regulating system of the production and distribution of commodities"—was

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<sup>3</sup> K. Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender and Political Culture in Britain, 1815–1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press and British Academy, 2009); and F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–136. For discussion see John Stevenson, "The 'Moral Economy' of the English Crowd: Myth and Reality," in Anthony J. Fletcher and John Stevenson, eds., *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 218–38.

beginning to emerge.<sup>5</sup> Malthusian claims concerning the deleterious consequences of assisting the poor acted as further solvents on the traditional assumptions that had shaped market relations.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, during the periods 1794–96 and 1799–1801 terrible weather conditions led to appalling harvests. The rocketing food prices precipitated desperate conditions among large sections of the laboring poor. During these years of dearth, the outbreak of numerous food riots illustrated the continuing adherence to the notion of a moral economy among the poor.<sup>7</sup> The responses of the elites demonstrated that many in this stratum also concurred with the values of the moral economy. As historians of the poor laws have argued, the assumption that the parish had a duty to provide relief for the poor had long been enmeshed in the broader set of ideas that encompassed the moral economy.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the rash of subscription societies and projects of dietary reform (such as abstaining from the consumption of wheat and corn to preserve them for the poor) appear to provide evidence of what one historian has described as a “new form of moral economy” in which local people responded to crisis conditions through recourse to further non-conflictual strategies.<sup>9</sup> Thus, despite a backdrop in which new modes of economic discourse and socioeconomic relations were gaining ascendancy, these are crucial years in understanding the contested and uneven emergence of modern notions of economic practice and behavior. This essay will suggest that these developments were also implicated in broader shifts in gender relations.

Scholarly literature on the moral economy has considered at length the extent to which food riots were distinguished by a gendered profile. The assumption that women were typically responsible for the provision

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret Schabas, *The Natural Origins of Economics* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5; Ann Firth, “From Oeconomy to ‘The Economy’: Population and Self-Interest in Discourses on Government,” *History of the Human Sciences* 11.3 (1998): 19–35, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Charlesworth, “From the Moral Economy of Devon to the Political Economy of Manchester, 1790–1812,” *Social History* 18 (1993): 205–17; E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy Reviewed,” in E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), 259–351.

<sup>7</sup> For full details see Roger Wells, *Wretched Faces: Famine in Wartime England, 1793–1801* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Bamfield, “Consumer-Owned Community Flour and Bread Societies in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries,” *Business History* 40.4 (1998): 16–36, 22. See also Wells, *Wretched Faces*, chap. 12, 202–18; Walter M. Stern, “The Bread Crisis in Britain, 1795–6,” *Economica* 31.122 (1964): 168–87; and John Stevenson, “Social Control and the Prevention of Riots in England, 1789–1829,” in A. P. Donajkowski, ed., *Social Control in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 27–50, 42–43.

of food within individual families has been seen as a key factor in their apparent prominence in food riots.<sup>10</sup> However, there has been no discussion of whether gender was an equally significant factor in the moral economy of the elites. Indeed, given the extent of attention paid to female philanthropy in this period, it is surprising that women's activities have not hitherto been seen in this light. As we shall see, contextualizing women's charitable ventures through their engagement with contemporary notions of the moral economy reveals their activities to be a more faltering phenomenon than is suggested in the assessments of historians such as F. K. Prochaska. It was a series of practices in which ideas about female community assistance were refracted through a range of gendered subjectivities, including individual sensitivities to local status and age.

This essay explores this theme through a case study of the extensive diaries kept by Katherine Plymley (1758–1829), sister of the Archdeacon of Salop, Joseph Plymley. During the period with which we are concerned she and her sister Ann lived with Joseph, assisting in the upbringing of three children from his first marriage: Josepha, Panton, and Jane (his wife had died giving birth to the latter). The family lived in the small village of Longnor, just a few miles from Shrewsbury, the provincial capital of the western county of Shropshire. As well as functioning at the center of a nexus of regional markets, Shrewsbury had flourished during the urban renaissance to emerge as a fashionable and lively venue for cultural and commercial exchange.<sup>11</sup> The Plymleys' eclectic social network embraced Shropshire ironmasters, local Anglican clergy, and radical dissenting ministers, as well as experimental scientists and doctors living in the environs of the town. In addition, the Plymleys moved on the peripheries of bluestocking circles, and their wider associates included leading figures in the anti-slavery campaign, most notably William Wilberforce, Josiah Wedgwood, and Thomas Clarkson. A number of their coterie (such as Theophilus Houlbrooke, a member of the Scottish Convention) were at the vanguard of revolutionary politics. While Katherine Plymley herself was a radical Whig who believed the government should defuse popular unrest by introducing measures of constitutional reform, her identity as a

<sup>10</sup> For debate see John Bohstedt, "Gender, Household and Community Politics: Women in English Riots, 1790–1810," *Past and Present* 120 (1988): 88–122; Thompson, "The Moral Economy"; and Malcolm I. Thomis and Jennifer Grimmett, *Women in Protest: 1800–1850* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), chap. 2, 28–46.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660–1770* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Angus McInnes, "The Emergence of a Leisure Town: Shrewsbury, 1660–1760," *Past and Present* 120 (1988): 53–87; Barrie Trinder, *The Industrial Revolution in Shropshire* (1973; London and Chichester: Phillimore and Co., 1981 ed.).

member of the local gentry in her Longnor parish was also of considerable importance to her.<sup>12</sup> This complex amalgam of influences had significant implications for her response to social and economic issues.

Considerable attention has been paid to women's involvement in political debates during the revolutionary period,<sup>13</sup> but less explored is the fact that for many this was entwined with a keen interest in related economic questions. Indeed, I will suggest here that at the local level an awareness of these issues could be a compelling reason for women to participate in public affairs. It is a sensitivity of which Hannah More, for one, was clearly acutely aware. For example, her famous song *The Riot; or Half a Loaf Is Better than No Bread* sought to convince the working classes that food riots were futile and misjudged, arguing that the government could not be held responsible for poor harvests; and the Quaker preacher Catharine Phillips issued a lengthy disquisition—*Considerations on the Causes of the High Price of Grain, and Other Articles of Provision*—that was an extended consideration of the economic, political, and agricultural factors underlying high food costs.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Plymley's written engagement remained within the private medium of manuscript notebooks, where she recorded in detail current events and her family's responses to them. Plymley was acutely conscious of her brother's superior political and social standing in relation to her own, and large sections of the notebooks are dominated by her transcriptions of his letters to well-known political figures or accounts of his opinions. She followed her brother in noting the deleterious impact of war on British commerce, and was alert to the ways in which the consequent "credit crunch" was leading to high rates of bankruptcy, with ill effects for the local iron trade.<sup>15</sup> Pitt's fiscal response to the extraordinary

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion see Kathryn Gleadle, "'Opinions Deliver'd in Conversation': Conversation, Politics, and Gender in the Late Eighteenth Century," in Jose Harris, ed., *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 61–78.

<sup>13</sup> From a wide literature, see, for example, G. Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution, 1790–1827* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); A. Craciun and K. Lokke, eds., *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); and K. Gleadle, "British Radical Women and the Late Nonconformist Enlightenment," in A. Vickery, ed., *Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Hannah More, *The Riot; or Half a Loaf Is Better than No Bread* (Perth: R. Morison, 1800); Catharine Phillips, *Considerations on the Causes of the High Price of Grain, and Other Articles of Provision, for a Number of Years Back; and Propositions for Reducing Them* (London: James Phillips, 1792).

<sup>15</sup> This included frequent increases in the taxes on spirits, tea, and sugar; on house-building materials (1794); on horses used for industry, tobacco, the wearing of wigs and hair powder, collateral successions to personal property (1795); on houses, servants, glass, paper, timekeep-

costs of the war with France included regular, steep tax increases. Plymley frequently alluded to the harmful impact of “the enormous increases of taxes” occasioned by what she and her brother perceived as an iniquitous and unnecessary war.<sup>16</sup> Yet her sense of engagement in these issues was not purely dependent upon her brother’s views. It is clear that she was highly well-informed herself—in 1793 she commented on the many excellent pamphlets she had read regarding the commercial situation.<sup>17</sup> At other times it is possible to detect subtle dissension from aspects of her brother’s views. By the early nineteenth century her output included notebooks that attempted a more retrospective analysis of family events. This included a narrative of the life and death of her niece, Jane. Jane’s self-imposed fast and subsequent illness formed a critical theme in the family’s response to the dearth of 1800–1801. These events prompted Plymley to articulate a highly self-conscious analysis of the relationship between young female identities and public economic discussion, as well as a defense of her own attempts to negotiate with Jane over her self-harming behavior. The various ways in which Plymley articulated women’s engagement in economic issues thus suggests how intricately layered the construction of female subjectivity could be.

Plymley’s understanding of her family’s responsibilities during the years of economic crisis was rooted in the older ideals of community welfare and patrician responsibility that continued to structure public interactions in the rural parish sphere. For Plymley, as for other women in her circle, her desire to assist the poor must be seen in this light, rather than deriving from a feminized notion of womanly benevolence. During the critical years of 1794–96 and 1800–1801 it became evident that Plymley’s democratic politics were complicated—and sometimes paradoxically reinforced—by the enduring resonance these traditional hierarchical relationships held for her. Plymley exhibited a firm commitment to the maintenance of cross-class interactions. She wrote on one occasion that “subordination being however an evil, though a necessary one, all good people will endeavour to lessen it by kindness to those within their reach.”<sup>18</sup> Such views had significant consequences for the family’s response to economic issues. Their position as paternalistic members of the gentry class

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ers, armorial bearings (1797 onwards), and income tax. See Stephen Dowell, *A History of Taxation and Taxes in England from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, vol. ii (London: Longmans Green, 1884), 202–17.

<sup>16</sup> Shropshire Record Office, Plymley Notebooks (hereafter SRO), 1066 / 13.

<sup>17</sup> SRO, 1066 / 18.

<sup>18</sup> SRO, 1066 / 28.

depended on the cultivation of an appearance of wealth. Katherine Plymley clearly felt the strains of such a situation and was relieved to discover of her close friend, Fred Iremonger, that "his situation in life has much resemblance to our own; both of us obliged to strict economy to support the appearance necessary to our situation."<sup>19</sup> The family's self-positioning as consumers was thus complex. It was thought necessary to retrench some of their expenditure so that they could continue to display a certain level of financial well-being in other regards. This gave them authority and status within the community, but it was also important to Plymley that the family demonstrate an interventionist approach in responding to the needs of others. As Plymley recorded, Shropshire, due to its good corn-growing conditions, was less affected than some areas by the food shortages of 1794–95 and 1800–1801. Nonetheless, the local poor were hit significantly by the huge rise in food prices—the details of which she recorded carefully in her diary, noting in 1795 the "very high price of every necessary of life." This, plus the "increase in taxes," imposed a duty, she wrote, "on all who had the power to contribute to the relief of the poor."<sup>20</sup>

Sandra Sherman has observed that during the 1790s a number of commentators, including Edmund Burke and Arthur Young, adopted a harsh and extreme interpretation of Adam Smith's conception of the market as a self-regulating machine. This led them to reject current poor-relief practices.<sup>21</sup> Some in Plymley's circle, such as her friend Archibald Alison, were certainly articulating what was to become the dominant voice of political economy: that the "morals" of the English poor were corrupted by the current system of poor relief.<sup>22</sup> However, Plymley herself was most impressed by those, such as Mr. Matthews of Shelderton, who practiced generosity toward those in need and remained committed to the principle of poor relief.<sup>23</sup> She wrote of the patience and worthiness of the poor, referring warmly to those "noblest institutions for the relief of those under the pressure of any accidental distress," and arguing that those requiring charity should be treated with generosity and respect.<sup>24</sup> Many in the community clearly agreed. In Shrewsbury the "principal farmers, millers and others"

<sup>19</sup> SRO, 1066 / 61.

<sup>20</sup> SRO, 1066 / 32–33, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Sandra Sherman, "The Wealth of Nations in the 1790s," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 34 (2005): 81–96.

<sup>22</sup> SRO, 1066 / 22, 37–38, 55. Disquiet over the social implications of parochial poor relief was eventually to lead, of course, to the draconian enactments of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which aimed to abolish outdoor relief to the able-bodied.

<sup>23</sup> SRO, 1066 / 37.

<sup>24</sup> SRO, 1066 / 13, 37, and 42.



entered into an agreement that they would bind themselves to fix grain prices in an attempt to assist the poor.<sup>25</sup> Individual actions were also vital. In 1795 Plymley detailed the actions of a local woman, Mrs. King, who, when faced during her husband's absence with a crowd of hostile colliers demanding that she provide them with grain, successfully negotiated with the protesters and arranged for corn to be distributed to them at a reduced price.<sup>26</sup> As recent research has shown, it was high economic standing, rather than feminine cultural capital, that appears to have provided women with the most direct means to act as dynamic agents within their community.<sup>27</sup> This seems to have applied equally to women's participation in the moral economy.

Supporting the culture of the moral economy was not an uncontested process. As Plymley carefully chronicled, some local gentry feared that price-fixing merely exacerbated the panic, others that farmers took advantage of subscriptions for the purchase of grains to raise their prices even higher. Moreover, there was considerable discussion about whether the food shortages had been aggravated or even caused by the practices of wealthy farmers and millers who were accused of preventing the just circulation of grain. "It is now much suspected that the scarcity was artificial," wrote Plymley in 1795.<sup>28</sup> The detailed economic calculations of Plymley's brother indicated a significant, actual shortfall in grain production, but Plymley clearly believed that many were hoarding their goods: "there is plenty in their granaries, they create this want, they grow rich by it," she fumed in 1795.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, whereas Joseph Plymley was increasingly interested in economic diagnoses that analyzed the economy in terms of its functioning as a macro phenomenon, Katherine Plymley remained heavily invested in a more traditional approach that privileged the importance of individual relationships and behavior.

At this point in Shrewsbury, as elsewhere, the wealthier inhabitants also began to uphold the moral economy through projects of dietary economy to free up foodstuffs for the poor. While this immediately turned the focus toward practices of household consumption, it did not provide a simple conduit for greater female participation, as one might assume. The gendered responses to these projects reveal the complex constitution of mas-

<sup>25</sup> *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 11 June 1795.

<sup>26</sup> SRO, 1066 / 35.

<sup>27</sup> See Gladle, *Borderline Citizens*, chaps. 4 and 6.

<sup>28</sup> SRO, 1066 / 35.

<sup>29</sup> SRO, 1066 / 33. See also SRO, 1066 / 35 and Plymley's brother's assessment reported in SRO, 1066 / 39.

culine and feminine identities within the day-to-day practices of the moral economy. "In many places," wrote Plymley, "the inhabitants agreed to use only brown bread [and] to abstain from the use of puddings [and] pastry."<sup>30</sup> Plymley further recorded how attempts to limit the consumption of grain by eating more meat, rice, and vegetables were "very much acted upon and very many families limited [*sic*] the allowance of bread to their servants and to themselves," while "many forbore the use of bread at every meal but breakfast."<sup>31</sup> The Plymley household itself experimented with a new recipe for bread, substituting one-third of the wheat with potatoes. However, in representing attempts at dietary reform as a household decision, Plymley tended to subtly reinforce a sense of male domestic authority. This potato bread (a recipe for which was published in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*) was soon adopted by other "gentlemen's families," as Plymley described them.<sup>32</sup> Despite women's close association with the practices of household consumption, the practice of alimentary economy did not necessarily result in greater female agency. "Associations are forming among the gentlemen in many places to use one third barley to two of wheat in their bread," she noted in the autumn of 1795.<sup>33</sup> Plymley presented this as a male-led activity, and one that was rooted as much in the public as in the private sphere.

Consumption and cooking were, in this context, gendered as masculine concerns, related to the male-dominated worlds of high politics and public duties. The privy council and both houses of Parliament issued pledges committing themselves to dietary abstinence; a Home Office circular exhorting people to attempt to reduce their consumption of wheat by a third achieved wide publicity through being announced by local clergy; and bills on wheaten bread, and debates on the price of corn, were fervently discussed in Parliament during 1795–1796.<sup>34</sup> As David Eastwood notes, magistrates attempted to encourage "the more fortunate in the virtues of self-sacrifice and restraint" as a means of assuaging the mounting food crisis.<sup>35</sup> Joseph Plymley exemplified this pattern. He actively encouraged the Board of Agriculture, of which he was a member, to institute voluntary associations among the elites to refrain from eating pastry or

<sup>30</sup> SRO, 1066 / 35.

<sup>31</sup> SRO, 1066 / 35 and 60.

<sup>32</sup> SRO, 1066 / 35 and 37, *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 8 May 1795.

<sup>33</sup> SRO, 1066 / 37.

<sup>34</sup> For details, see J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795–1834* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969); Beatrice and Sidney Webb, "The Assize of Bread," *Economic Journal* 14.54 (1904): 196–218, 208.

<sup>35</sup> David Eastwood, *Governing Rural England: Tradition and Transformation in Local Government, 1780–1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 116.

puddings made with wheat flour, and further suggested the desirability of agreements “among the more opulent not to give formal dinners.”<sup>36</sup> Joseph also took the lead in his household’s consumption decisions, his domestic authority presumably bolstered by his masculine identities as a magistrate and an agricultural expert. “My brother,” wrote Katherine Plymley, “from a liberality of mind, has an utter repugnance to limit his servants in the articles of meat and drink, but as far as our own example went we spared bread as much as we easily could.”<sup>37</sup> In addition, Joseph Plymley’s responses indicate his preparedness to experiment with newer, more extensive schemes. He prepared detailed advice concerning the preparation of cheap broth, including the proportions required, and possible means of cheaply flavoring it.<sup>38</sup> As Sherman has suggested, such ambitious ideas to provide the poor with soup from the mid-1790s onwards formed part of a broader shift away from traditional paternalism in favor of efficient, universalizing schemes.<sup>39</sup>

The nature of women’s contributions to such projects varied. When a meeting was held at Shrewsbury Guildhall in 1795 to set up a fund to assist the poor and to discourage elite consumption of wheat, women—presumably those of independent economic means—formed nearly twenty percent of subscribers. The names of Joseph Plymley’s female kin did not appear among them, however.<sup>40</sup> Joseph Plymley was a prominent local figure, and the Plymley women seem to have looked upon him as their public representative. They exercised charity not through associational activity but through personal philanthropy in their parish. Regarding the particular agenda of food consumption, they preferred to make their contribution through domestic efforts. Indeed, if the family’s practices of tightened consumption were largely carried out under Joseph’s directions, his female relatives were especially zealous in their execution. This phenomenon requires some careful unpacking, however—the gendered imperatives at work were far from straightforward. For Katherine, the implications of the moral economy for personal consumption accorded well with the amalgamation of Evangelicalism and radical politics that already typified her views. In 1792 her personal notes on the Scriptures included a disquisition

<sup>36</sup> SRO, 1066 / 38, 54; *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 2 August 1792.

<sup>37</sup> SRO, 1066 / 60. The Plymley household was one of many that boycotted Caribbean sugar as a means of economic protest. Similarly, Plymley did not present the campaign as a peculiar female phenomenon; for example, SRO 1066 / 31.

<sup>38</sup> SRO, 1066 / 57.

<sup>39</sup> Sandra Sherman, *Imagining Poverty: Quantification and the Decline of Paternalism* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2001), chap. 6, 177–215.

<sup>40</sup> *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 17 July 1795.

on what she perceived to be the shocking waste of food in elite households, noting that "those whose fortune enables them to keep such a table" should realize it is "an encroachment on the rights of the poor."<sup>41</sup> In 1799 she suggested that in the oppressive political climate of the day, in which the concept of liberty was so sensitive, it was possible only to express a religiously inspired liberty. Taking inspiration from 2 Corinthians 3, she wrote of "the truest liberty, freedom from the dominion of the passions."<sup>42</sup> Her aversion to the rule of the passions accorded with her respect for the work of William Paley, who insisted, in his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), that the poor had a right to basic levels of subsistence, and that the rich had a duty to limit their diet so as to provide for them.<sup>43</sup> Katherine Plymley was particularly struck by his ideas on virtuous self-restraint—views she sought to instill in her nephew and nieces—and was appalled to hear stories of Paley's apparent gluttony.<sup>44</sup> Katherine and her young charges were also careful students of Joseph Butler, often reading aloud his *Analogy of Religion* (1736), which asserted there to be a hierarchy of human behaviors in which visceral passions and needs held the lowest place.<sup>45</sup> As this indicates, Plymley did not construct her understandings of "virtue" purely in terms of its gendered resonances; rather, the Plymley women sought to establish their economic actions with reference to a specific Anglican intellectual canon.<sup>46</sup>

However, in the execution of these ideals a distinct pattern of gendered behavior swiftly emerged within the household—one that especially affected Katherine's fourteen-year-old niece, Jane. For Jane, the practice of moral economy was refracted through a series of other notions of appropriate femininity. These involved sensibilities deriving from her experience of a gendered body, her age, and an awareness of the lack of other opportunities for action available to her. Jane had already been suffering from an undiagnosed illness that led to a loss of appetite when, in 1801, she began to deliberately limit her diet. It was soon apparent that Jane, contriving to

<sup>41</sup> K. Plymley, "Thoughts written at Lyth" (1792), SRO, 567 / 5 / 5 / 1 / 33.

<sup>42</sup> K. Plymley, "Thoughts written at Longnor" (1799), SRO, 567 / 5 / 5 / 1 / 34.

<sup>43</sup> See T. A. Horne, "'The Poor Have a Claim Founded in the Law of Nature': William Paley and the Rights of the Poor," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23 (1985): 51–70.

<sup>44</sup> SRO, 1066 / 58 and 55.

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of Butler and Evangelicalism, see Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 170–83.

<sup>46</sup> Jane's asceticism also derived from the influence of Quaker mores, according to J. K. L. Dahn, "A Construction of Taste with Special Reference to Katherine Plymley, 1758–1829," PhD thesis, University of Wales, 2001.

eat alone where possible, was abstaining from both breakfast and lunch, and would take only the plainest food at dinner and supper. Jane's strict regimen reached a peak in 1801, but she continued to live by an extremely ascetic dietary code. In 1802 her aunt reported that Jane "scarcely could be more emaciated."<sup>47</sup> Until her death six years later, Jane experienced many of the physical side effects now associated with anorexia nervosa: abdominal pain, lethargy, weakness, heart problems, and poor circulation.

By the time of Jane's illness, the tone of Plymley's notebooks had shifted considerably. There was still a marked tendency for Katherine to recount her narratives in terms of a collective family identity, but a much more emphatic register becomes evident at this point, perhaps because of the emotional factors involved. She was anxious to convey the family's attempts to reason with Jane, remembering with anguish that "we argued with her, entreated her . . . And in vain urged everything we could think of that was likely to produce any effect. She heard us but we had the mortification to see that we failed to convince."<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, she also wished Jane's behavior to be remembered as an ethical (if misguided) decision. She understood Jane's actions in the context of the wider efforts of dietary abstinence being practiced within their community: "in the latter end of 1800 and spring of 1801, it was thought by many . . . an advisable measure that those who could afford to purchase flesh meat should live much upon that and garden stuff, rice etc that as much corn may remain for the consumption of the poor as could be contrived." Jane's food denial, according to her aunt, thus "began from the purest the most charitable, the most conscientious motives." For Plymley this was consistent with Jane's character. She presented her as an intensely religious young woman who desisted from the reading of plays and novels, and who lived a quiet life of contemplation and study.<sup>49</sup>

Nonetheless, just as the sugar boycott provided a way for women and children to intervene in public political debates,<sup>50</sup> dietary abstinence appears to have formed a means for Jane to register an engagement with the economic crisis unfolding around her. "Her idea," Plymley explained, "was that the poor were obliged to live upon very little, yet they not only did live but work'd. She believed herself undeserving of more than wou'd support nature in health, and she thought from the example of the lower

<sup>47</sup> SRO, 567 / 5 / 5 / 1 / 20.

<sup>48</sup> SRO, 1066 / 60.

<sup>49</sup> SRO, 1066 / 56.

<sup>50</sup> See Clare Midgley, "Slave Sugar Boycotts, Female Activism and the Domestic Base of British Anti-slavery Culture," *Slavery and Abolition* 17 (1996): 137–62.

orders that a very little would do that."<sup>51</sup> Jane, recorded her aunt, "thought very highly of the general character of the poor and very lowly of herself."<sup>52</sup>

Plymley chose to cast Jane's character within highly gendered terms. "She loves all the useful works that belong to women," claimed Plymley, "and is very industrious in them."<sup>53</sup> However, in a retrospective account she revealed that a female domain of virtuous conduct was constructed at considerable psychological cost. She remembered that Jane's great intelligence led her to entertain "more extensive ideas of usefulness than could be performed by one of her age and in her situation." Plymley explained that Jane had repeated "reveries" concerning the kinds of activities she might enact, but "she hoped in future not to give way to it, but to direct her thoughts to duties she could perform in her situation." Katherine recorded Jane's prayer that she might "learn to be content in insignificance and perform to the best of my ability the passive duties of my confined sphere of action."<sup>54</sup> Although the family were prepared to consider women having public economic influence (they discussed with the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson his plans for female shareholders to be able to exercise a vote in the running of the Sierra Leone company),<sup>55</sup> these were not opportunities that the teenaged Jane felt were available to her, and she articulated a need to suppress her wider public ambitions.

While Plymley seemed rather unruffled by the alcoholic excesses and adultery of some of her friends,<sup>56</sup> the ideal citizen, for her, combined both private and public virtue. That is to say, domestic virtue was not configured as simply "feminine" within this family. She praised Wilberforce for his abstemious habit of eating at his desk: "how much private care and comfort public men, who are really conscientious, give up to the discharge of their duty," she mused.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, in eulogizing her brother she emphasized that in addition to his exemplary public character, he was "not less estimable for the virtues of private life."<sup>58</sup> These were values that Jane clearly shared, but of course as an adolescent female she was unable to fulfill the other half of Katherine's formula for the model citizen: public duty. Jane therefore turned her life into a mission to excel in the practice of private virtue—seemingly to counteract the fact that she was deprived of the opportuni-

<sup>51</sup> SRO, 1066 / 60.

<sup>52</sup> SRO, 1066 / 60.

<sup>53</sup> SRO, 1066 / 56.

<sup>54</sup> SRO, 1066 / 147.

<sup>55</sup> SRO, 1066 / 16.

<sup>56</sup> SRO, 1066 / 49, 108.

<sup>57</sup> SRO, 1066 / 67.

<sup>58</sup> SRO, 1066 / 140.

ties for public excellence. This required repressing her fantasies of greater public exertion. In the process, her sense of virtue seems to have become entwined in broader cultural discourses concerning the female body. Fasting, of course, is not simply a feminine behavior.<sup>59</sup> In Georgian Britain, public fasts were still announced at times of national crisis as a means of focusing the country's worship. Yet there was a long tradition associating female piety with fasting, and cultural constructs of femininity contributed to such a pattern.<sup>60</sup> The widespread involvement of women in the thriving consumerism of the late eighteenth-century economy was accompanied by ubiquitous criticisms of the corrupting and corruptible female consumer. As a result, the female body became the site of considerable cultural contestation. To affect the mien of model female gentility required peculiar strategies of discipline.<sup>61</sup> The nature of female eating was often held up to scrutiny by contemporary commentators. John Gregory's widely read *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774) dwelled much on the horrors of female gluttony. The "luxury of eating," Gregory insisted, "is a despicable selfish vice in men; but in your sex it is beyond expression indelicate and disgusting."<sup>62</sup> Gregory's work would surely have been well-known to Jane Plymley (she was very friendly with Gregory's own daughter, Dorothy Alison). Jane's abhorrence of food, forged in the economic crisis of 1800–1801, appears to have merged customary models of the moral economy with the emergent, wider cultural constructions of appropriate female conduct—and to tragic ends. The moral economy was a set of practices and assumptions rooted in the hierarchies of status, not gender. However, the example of Jane Plymley suggests that it encouraged behaviors that intersected with discrete, gendered discourses to produce complicated female subjectivities.

Arguably, the older, pre-industrial understanding of *æconomy*, which was based on the household model of the guardianship of resources, had the potential to validate female skills and culture to a greater degree than the newer notion of the economy as a self-regulating entity. The former might

<sup>59</sup> See R. M. Griffith, "Apostles of Abstinence: Fasting and Masculinity during the Progressive Era," *American Quarterly* 52.4 (2000): 599–638.

<sup>60</sup> Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); see also Karen Hollis, "Fasting Women: Bodily Claims and Narrative Crises in Eighteenth-Century Science," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34.4 (2001): 523–38.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); John Brewer, "'The Most Polite Age and the Most Vicious': Attitudes Towards Culture as a Commodity, 1660–1800," in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds., *The Consumption of Culture, 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text* (London: Routledge, 1995), 341–61, 355.

<sup>62</sup> John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (London: W. Strahan, 1774), 39.

have had special resonance for married women of gentry status, especially those who were either childless or at a mature stage in their life cycle, and who had the requisite personal and monetary resources for such financial stewardship. Joseph Plymley's second wife, whom he married in 1790, is rarely mentioned by Katherine. She was very young and by 1795 had three small children. In contrast, Plymley recorded that her ideal of "the true housewife and economist [*sic*]" was her friend Mrs. Bache, a woman of more mature years and described by Plymley as "accessible [*sic*] to, and ready to help all who are in want."<sup>63</sup> In contrast, for those women whose position in the life cycle or lack of independent means restricted their activities, engaging in the culture of the moral economy might involve enacting its values through conduits of behavior that had more problematic consequences. For Jane, unlike the older figure of Mrs Bache, it was bodily abnegation that provided the most accessible means to participate in the moral economy.

The complicated makeup of the Plymley women's subjectivities is a testament to the conflicting intellectual and sociocultural practices that were fracturing dominant economic discourses in this transitional period. Recent scholars have demonstrated that it is unhelpful to present the traditional moral economy and the new imperatives of political economy as sharp dichotomies, and it is clear that notions of the former persisted well into the nineteenth century.<sup>64</sup> The Plymley archive supports such a conclusion, while also pointing to the complex gendered patterns this involved. Female empowerment in both the traditional moral economy and also the emergent industrial economy was highly contingent, often depending on regional or personal circumstances, such as an individual's financial or marital position. Married women may still have had more room for independent engagement in the moral economy than was often the case with dependent, unmarried females, although as we have seen, family consumer decisions were not simply gendered in this way.

Traditionally, the increasing philanthropic energy of women from the middling sorts has been interpreted in the light of social and political narratives, such as the emergence of Evangelicalism, the development of middle-class consciousness, and the challenges occasioned by the French Revolution. I have argued here that women's activities need also

<sup>63</sup> SRO, 1066 / 44.

<sup>64</sup> For example, Susan E. Brown, "'A Just and Profitable Commerce': Moral Economy and the Middle Classes in Eighteenth-Century London," *Journal of British Studies* 32.4 (1993): 305–32; and Peter Jones, "Swing, Speenhamland and Rural Social Relations: The 'Moral Economy' of the English Crowd in the Nineteenth Century," *Social History* 32.3 (2007): 271–90.



to be viewed as an informed response to contemporary economic issues. The challenge to the traditional norms of the moral economy that emerged starkly in the 1790s led to a reactive reassertion of paternalism in some local contexts—a process in which women clearly played an important role. However, as we have seen, individuals negotiated these activities through the prism of other discourses and practices, and these were often more sharply gendered. During the harsh economic climate of the 1790s and early 1800s, the practical implications of deprivation meant that the body itself became a site for the articulation of economic effects. As Kowaleski-Wallace suggests, “It is important to incorporate ‘the role of the human body’ in the processes of ‘social formation.’”<sup>65</sup> The philanthropic impulse that historians have noted as central to the burgeoning civic involvement of women had complicated social and cultural roots and was not necessarily experienced as an indicator of female public advancement. Women could feel engaged in economic debate and practice in a multitude of ways. The testimony of Katherine Plymley suggests that varying, and even contradictory, conceptions of the economy and the distribution and regulation of resources could overlap and be enmeshed in the day-to-day lives and thoughts of contemporaries. This was a process in which gender was critical—but in subtle and sometimes unpredictable ways.

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<sup>65</sup> Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, 11.