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## 5. ‘Go to hyr neyborhs wher she dwelte before’: reputation and mobility at the London Consistory Court in the early sixteenth century

*Charlotte Berry*

In the summer of 1521 a woman named Agnes Cockerel was expelled from her home in the London parish of St. Sepulchre without Newgate.<sup>1</sup> Agnes was not the kind of woman that respectable Londoners wanted living on their street. She was described as a prostitute ‘a brothel of her taylle’ (fo. 101) and ‘a crafty dame’ (fo. 100).<sup>2</sup> In response, she launched a defamation case at the London Consistory Court. The case provides a rare perspective on the workings of expulsion as a punishment and the wider relationship between reputation and mobility at the end of the middle ages.

The parties and witnesses to the case were a thoroughly ordinary crowd of medieval Londoners: a widow and her apprentice; a young fletcher; a capper and his wife; and Agnes, who described herself as a midwife. Caroline Barron has written of the difficulty of recovering the lives of the ‘small people’ of late medieval London, citizens with some foot on the low rungs of the civic ladder, and the ‘smaller’, marginalized people excluded from citizenship and sometimes forced to leave the city itself.<sup>3</sup> The ordinary ‘small’ people, and occasionally the marginalized ‘smaller’ people, appeared as witnesses in consistory court cases, giving narrative depositions which included many incidental details about their day-to-day lives and personal histories. They appeared as witnesses alongside those of higher status and members of the clergy. The records are thus a valuable resource for the range

<sup>1</sup> All references to and quotations from the case of Cockerel *contra* Beckett are taken from *Consistory Court Deposition Book, 1520–24* (LMA, DL/C/0205, fos. 99–102v).

<sup>2</sup> The phrase implies that she sold sex. Brothel was, in this period, a word for a prostitute. ‘Tail’ could refer to the posterior or genitals: ‘brothel, n.’ and ‘tail, n.’, *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/23789>>, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/197067>> [accessed 3 Jan. 2019].

<sup>3</sup> C. M. Barron, ‘Searching for the “small people” of medieval London’, *Local Historian* xxxviii (2008), 83–94, at pp. 85–6.

C. Berry, “Go to hyr neyborhs wher she dwelte before”: reputation and mobility at the London Consistory Court in the early sixteenth century, in *Medieval Londoners: essays to mark the eightieth birthday of Caroline M. Barron*, ed. E. A. New and C. Steer (London, 2019), pp. 95–116. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0.

of experiences they represent and shed light on how both the comfortably off and the less wealthy were perceived by their neighbours.

This chapter exploits the richness and depth of social description in consistory depositions as a starting point to explore the themes of mobility and reputation among late medieval Londoners. Reputation was important for Londoners of all social levels; for the better off, defence of their reputation was crucial to maintaining access to influential social networks and financial credit.<sup>4</sup> A bad one could, as will be discussed, result in expulsion from the neighbourhood. Moreover, the city contained a multitude of neighbourhoods in which it was impossible for every Londoner to be known. In the case of Cockerel *contra* Beckett, which is discussed at length in this chapter, a landlady suspicious of her new tenant's reputation was told to 'go to hyr neybors wher she dwelte before' (fo. 99v). As this phrase implies, it was within the neighbourhood that a person's character was known. Mobility across the many social spaces contained within the city could arouse suspicion and those who moved could face difficulties in establishing their good character among their new neighbours.

### ***Consistory court depositions as evidence for mobility***

The consistory court was the highest church court within London, held by the bishop of London. It heard suits relating to canon law: disputes over tithes, marriages, marital separation and defamation were among the most common cases. Unlike lower ecclesiastical courts, most suits were brought by a named aggrieved party, although cases could also be brought *ex officio* by order of the court itself.<sup>5</sup> Each party presented a series of witnesses (deponents) who made witness statements (depositions) regarding the disputed events surrounding a case. Depositions were made in response to a series of articles and interrogatories. The articles set out the facts of the case as they were seen by that party. The interrogatories similarly set out the facts according to the defendant. Each was designed by canon lawyers to draw out information which gave credence to either party's narrative.<sup>6</sup> Both articles and interrogatories often asked witnesses questions not just about the material of the case, but also about their knowledge of the opposing party's witnesses, their places of residence and reputation within

<sup>4</sup> H. Robb, 'Reputation in the fifteenth century credit market; some tales from the ecclesiastical courts of York', *Cult. and Soc. History*, xv (2018), 297–313, at pp. 307–10.

<sup>5</sup> On the process of the consistory and its difference to other ecclesiastical courts, see R. M. Wunderli, *London Church Courts and Society on the Eve of the Reformation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), pp. 7–15.

<sup>6</sup> S. A. McDonough, *Witnesses, Neighbors, and Community in Late Medieval Marseille* (New York, 2013), p. 40.

the community. Unlike in a modern court, local gossip about a person or a series of events, often termed their 'fame', was materially important in the consistory and other ecclesiastical courts.<sup>7</sup> All that survives of the London Consistory Court in this period are its deposition books, meaning that we know neither the outcome of the cases nor the precise arguments of either party, other than what can be inferred from the witness statements. However, the depositions, with their myriad of incidental detail about daily life, personal history and social relations, are a rich seam of material for social historians.

Martin Ingram's study of the regulation of sex in England made extensive use of the London consistory records, demonstrating their importance as documents of legal and communal punishment and control.<sup>8</sup> As records of individual voices depositions are problematic, being mediated through both the requirements of the court and the anticipatory 'pre-construction' of witnesses themselves.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as Shannon McSheffrey has argued, they offer no direct window into the events described, but instead a series of narratives calculated to appear plausible in court.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, ecclesiastical court depositions are very useful records for mobility and migration in England owing to the fact that, unlike in secular courts, witnesses were regularly required to provide details of their age and places of past and present residence. Such sources have been well used by early modern historians and, to a lesser degree, by late medievalists to study mobility, but are yet to be widely exploited for this theme by urban historians or those studying London before the late sixteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> T. S. Fenster and D. L. Smail, 'Introduction', in *Fama: the Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe*, ed. T. S. Fenster and D. L. Smail (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003), pp. 1–11; McDonough, *Witnesses, Neighbors, and Community*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>8</sup> M. Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge: Regulating Sex in England, 1470–1600* (Cambridge, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> T. Johnson, 'The preconstruction of witness testimony: law and social discourse in England before the Reformation', *Law and Hist. Rev.*, xxxii (2014), 127–47.

<sup>10</sup> S. McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2006), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> P. Clark, 'Migration in England during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', in *Migration and Society in Early Modern England*, ed. P. Clark and D. Souden (London, 1987), pp. 213–52; L. R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex 1350–1525* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 164–5; J. Whittle, 'Population mobility in rural Norfolk among landholders and others c.1440–c.1600', in *The Self-Contained Village?: the Social History of Rural Communities, 1250–1900*, ed. C. Dyer (Hatfield, 2006), pp. 28–45; P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c.1300–1520* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 217–63; L. B. Smith, 'A view from an ecclesiastical court – mobility and marriage in a border society at the end of the middle ages', in *From Medieval to Modern Wales: Historical Essays in Honour of Kenneth O. Morgan and Ralph A. Griffiths*, ed. R. R. Davies and G. H. Jenkins (Cardiff, 2004), pp. 64–80.

What make the consistory depositions such important sources for mobility comes down to two factors: the social range of witnesses and the extraordinary detail of the depositions. Witnesses ranged in status from servants and watermen to merchants and gentlemen. In some cases parties might have manipulated an event itself to engineer a persuasively high-status set of witnesses, particularly in the making of marriage contracts.<sup>12</sup> However, ultimately what the court required was a detailed account of an event and deponents who had sufficient knowledge of the circumstances of a dispute. Thus, witnesses were often of lower status or occupied menial positions in a household.<sup>13</sup> Under canon law the testimony of paupers was supposed to be ineligible.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, in London, as has been noted in similar records at Marseilles, parties seem to have made their own judgments about who was a suitable witness.<sup>15</sup> Witnesses frequently were described, or described themselves, as 'an honest pauper'.<sup>16</sup> There was thus a deal of negotiation about who was sufficient to appear, permitting the wide social range of deponents. This also led to potential for cases to become protracted as multiple counter-witnesses were called to depose about the status of other deponents rather than the particulars of the case.<sup>17</sup>

As well as these insights from others, deponents also gave much information about themselves. Witnesses were often asked to give histories of previous residences and even place of birth. This was especially the case when witnesses had only been resident for a short time: those living in a parish for two years or less often gave a history of their previous two or three parishes. The deposition book in which Agnes Cockerel's case appears, DL/C/207, seems to coincide with a period when the London Consistory Court was especially diligent in its recording of places of birth. As Table 5.1 shows, nearly three-quarters of witnesses in sampled cases from this deposition book provided their place of birth, compared with barely a fifth in the previous book. This diligence was perhaps influenced by Cardinal

<sup>12</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture*, pp. 116–20.

<sup>13</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture*, p. 197.

<sup>14</sup> McDonough, *Witnesses, Neighbors, and Community*, p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> McDonough, *Witnesses, Neighbors, and Community*, pp. 52–4.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., the description of Thomas Plowghe as 'an honest pauper' (LMA, DL/C/207, fo. 268); Henry Fit, Richard Thompson and James Adene are described as 'honest paupers' (LMA, DL/C/208, fo. 38v); 'John Broke is an honest person save that he is reputed as a pauper' (LMA, DL/C/207, fo. 255); Helen Elys described herself as poor but honest (LMA, DL/C/208, fo. 65v).

<sup>17</sup> S. McSheffrey, 'Liberties of London: social networks, sexual disorder, and independent jurisdiction in the late medieval English metropolis', in *Crossing Borders: Boundaries and Margins in Medieval and Early Modern Britain*, ed. K. J. Kesselring and S. Butler (Leiden, 2018), pp. 216–36, at pp. 219–21.

Wolsey's drive against immorality in London and its surroundings in the late 1510s, which included a crackdown on vagrancy.<sup>18</sup>

Table 5.1. Proportion of deponents with place of birth recorded in consistory court deposition books.<sup>19</sup>

Deposition book	Period covered	Total of witnesses in selected cases	Number naming place of birth	% with place of birth given
DL/C/0205	1467–76	60	4	6.70%
DL/C/A/001/ MS09065, MS09065B	1487–96	51	3	5.90%
DL/C/0206	1510–6	84	15	18.10%
DL/C/0207	1520–4	97	71	73.20%
DL/C/0208	1529–33	109	51	46.80%
Total	—	401	144	36%

Crucially, we can also connect these histories of mobility with detailed understanding of the social status of parties and witnesses and the *fama* which circulated about them among their neighbours. *Fama*, that which was said about someone, was not peripheral to a case, but was an essential component of the evidence presented in medieval courts.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes the defence of reputation or justification of a perceived insult was the explicit purpose of a case, as with defamation. Often information about status and reputation made its way into the records incidentally as parties gathered counter-witnesses who opposed not just what a witness had said but also their entitlement to depose. Movement itself was sometimes used as a sign of insufficient status to depose, as will be seen. The depositions can therefore give us a sense of the workings of reputation for a relatively wide spectrum of people and so indicate how movement around the city (thus away from localized gossip networks) might affect *fama* in varied ways.

<sup>18</sup> Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, pp. 156–60.

<sup>19</sup> Cases were gathered for my doctoral research into the connection between social and spatial marginality in the city of London. The cases chosen all focussed on events and people living in the city of London, rather than the wider diocese. The selection of cases included all those relating to the extramural parishes as well as others which featured low-status witnesses and shed particular light on mobility or the workings of communal punishment (C. Berry, 'Margins and marginality in fifteenth-century London' (unpublished University of London PhD thesis, 2018), pp. 169–73).

<sup>20</sup> Fenster and Smail, 'Introduction', p. 3.

### *June 1521: St. Sepulchre without Newgate*

Agnes Cockerel's case was a defamation suit against John Beckett, capper, and his wife Elizabeth, of the extramural parish of St. Sepulchre without Newgate. According to the chantry certificates of 1548, St. Sepulchre was London's most populous parish with 3,400 recorded communicants.<sup>21</sup> It was a sprawling parish to the north-west of London's walls which extended from near Ludgate in the south into Clerkenwell beyond the jurisdiction of the city at its north. Although suburban, it was quite intensively developed, influenced by the busy route from London to Westminster as well as the presence of West Smithfield market.<sup>22</sup> Central to the case was a move from this extramural neighbourhood into the centre of the city, prompted by Agnes Cockerel's expulsion. In geographic terms this move was a fairly short one. However, in its apparent attempt to outrun her poor reputation, it reveals that social knowledge might not (or could be anticipated not to) circulate between the extramural and intramural parts of London.

The origins of the feud which caused the incident of defamation are a little obscure; the circumstances suggest that the Becketts were in some way involved in Agnes's expulsion from the ward and had perhaps been her landlords. Witnesses were questioned about a series of events surrounding the expulsion. These began with an argument witnessed by John Gruege, a fletcher. While sitting working in his shop opposite John Beckett's house in late June 1521 Gruege saw a passionate dispute between Agnes Cockerel, John and Elizabeth. While standing in the door of Beckett's shop, Cockerel 'said openly and in an audible voice and an evil and angry manner' to John Beckett 'thow pyllery knave and papyr face knave I shall make the to were a papyr and make the over dere of a grote and to shytt in thy wyndowes and I have done with the' (fo. 99). Most of her insults suggested John was a liar and alluded to suing him: to 'wear a paper' meant to wear a badge of criminal conviction.<sup>23</sup> To make Beckett 'overdear of a groat' would perhaps mean to reduce him to poverty.<sup>24</sup> 'Make the ... to shytt in thy wyndowes' is

<sup>21</sup> *London and Middlesex Chantry Certificate 1548*, ed. C. J. Kitching (London Rec. Soc., xvi, 1980), p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> See Map 2 and the map of the parishes of London c.1520 in M. D. Lobel, *The City of London from Prehistoric Times to c.1520* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> 'paper, n. and adj. 8', *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/137122>> [accessed 3 Jan. 2019].

<sup>24</sup> Overdear usually meant that a given item was too expensive. The *OED* cites Taverner's 1539 translation of Erasmus's proverbs as using the phrase 'ouer dere of a farthyng' to mean that something was too costly at that price. Agnes Cockerel's statement, as reported, makes little sense if 'the' (John Beckett) was to be made too expensive so perhaps 'dere' is meant in the sense of being fond ('overdear, adv. and adj.' and 'dear, n. 5a', *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/134468>> [accessed 6 Jan. 2019]).



a more cryptic, if entertaining, threat. Perhaps Cockerel meant she would expose Beckett's alleged duplicity for the world to see, or perhaps it was meant literally as an allusion to the indignities of the poverty to which she would reduce him by her legal suit. In response, Beckett told her to leave, saying 'gete the hens dame, I pray the hens or ells wyll I' and his wife added 'I defy the dame. I sett not by thy malesse thow art known well, I nowe what though arte' (fo. 99). These threats may be examples of pre-construction of depositions by consistory witnesses, as identified by Tom Johnson.<sup>25</sup> With their convenient avoidance of specific accusations or defamatory language, they are perhaps versions of the words spoken modified to protect the Becketts in court.

This exchange appears to have coincided with Agnes Cockerel's departure from the neighbourhood. The expulsion itself was only described in hearsay by witnesses, who were inconsistent on whether she had been expelled from the ward or from the parish.<sup>26</sup> Expulsion was a mechanism of civic justice, usually ordered by the alderman of a city ward.<sup>27</sup> However, the parish of St. Sepulchre lay almost entirely within the ward of Farringdon Without (bar a very small portion outside the city's jurisdiction), so witnesses may have regarded the effect of expulsion from either as the same. John Gruege deposed on Cockerel's behalf, but his deposition seems unlikely to have done much to help her case since he told the court the grounds for her expulsion. Not only did he provide the only witness to her insults against the Becketts, he also told the court that the Becketts' alleged defamation had done minimal damage to Cockerel's reputation. Her reputation was not damaged, he said, because she had been expelled on account of her evil conversation and because many people called her a woman of ill fame.<sup>28</sup> The expulsion followed a search made of Agnes's house at night, probably led by the ward constables but conducted by a mixed group of neighbours.<sup>29</sup> An arrest was made on account of undefined suspicious activity found to

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, 'The preconstruction of witness testimony', p. 143.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Holand deposed that John Beckett said 'she was putt ought of thys warde' (fo. 101) but John Gruege deposed that '*Agnes fuit expulsatur extra eandem parochiam*' (Agnes was expelled from that parish) (fo. 100).

<sup>27</sup> Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, pp. 223–4.

<sup>28</sup> '*dicit quod bona fama ipsius Agnetis minime est lesa occasione prolacionis verborum superiorum per eum depositorum ut credit quia dicit quod eadem Agnes fuit expulsata extra eandem parochiam propter malam conversacionem suam... et quod audivit de diversis personis quod fuit mulier male fame*' (He says that the good fame of Agnes is minimally damaged on occasion of the expression of the words deposed by him above as he believes, because the same Agnes was expelled from the parish due to her evil conversation ... and that he heard from diverse people that she was a woman of ill fame) (LMA, DL/C/0207, fo. 100).

<sup>29</sup> Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, p. 222.



be going on, most likely sexual given the accusations against Cockerel and her male servant discussed below. This is the only point where Gruege's deposition is favourable to the party he supposedly appeared for, as he suggests her servant Robert Dyngley was arrested and taken to the Counter jail alone, whilst Cockerel could not be found.<sup>30</sup> Another witness said Agnes had also been arrested. In either case, the outcome was that Agnes Cockerel and Robert Dyngley found themselves expelled and looking for a new place to live.

About two weeks later Alice Bayly, a sixty-nine-year-old widow of the central London parish of St. Mary Woolnoth, arrived at the Becketts' house. She was accompanied by her apprentice, Richard Holand, and another man called David. Both Bayly and Holand had been born in Denbigh in north Wales and young Richard's accent was perhaps still strong, since Gruege described him as 'foren' (fo. 99v).<sup>31</sup> Bayly approached John Beckett as he worked in his shop and asked him whether he knew 'Maystres Cockerel the midwyff' (fo. 99v) who had recently lived in that neighbourhood. Beckett said he did but, according to Holand, he would say no more in the street and instead invited Bayly to 'come nere and drynke'.

In the Becketts' house there followed a discussion about Agnes Cockerel's character. Bayly explained that, 'I have letten her a howse off myn and I wolde be glade to knowe off what conversation she wer' (fo. 102). As Gruege's reference to Cockerel's 'evil conversation' (*malam conversacionem*) (fo. 100) suggests, conversation was loaded with the double meaning of both the kind of words she spoke and the manner in which she conducted her life. She had taken a penny from Cockerel as surety for her rent but had been concerned by rumours about the ill fame of Agnes and her servant, Robert Dyngley. This would suggest that Cockerel's poor reputation was remarkably widespread given the distance between St. Sepulchre and St. Mary Woolnoth parishes (Figure 5.1). However, Cockerel may simply have been unlucky. Widow Bayly's apprentice Richard Holand was aware of Agnes's poor reputation from years before 'when she was at Tourney' (fo. 100) and it may have been he who alerted Bayly to the rumours.

John Beckett was initially evasive, telling Bayly to 'go to hyr neybor wher she dwelte before at Holborne Crosse' (fo. 99v). Holborn Cross lay within St. Sepulchre parish, although John's wording suggests that despite this it was considered a separate neighbourhood.<sup>32</sup> This detail suggests the

<sup>30</sup> Counter or compter was a term for a prison, of which there were two described by this name in the city (at Poultry and Bread Street).

<sup>31</sup> See the discussion of this term below.

<sup>32</sup> Neither the street where the Becketts lived nor where Agnes Cockerel lived is ever mentioned in the depositions.

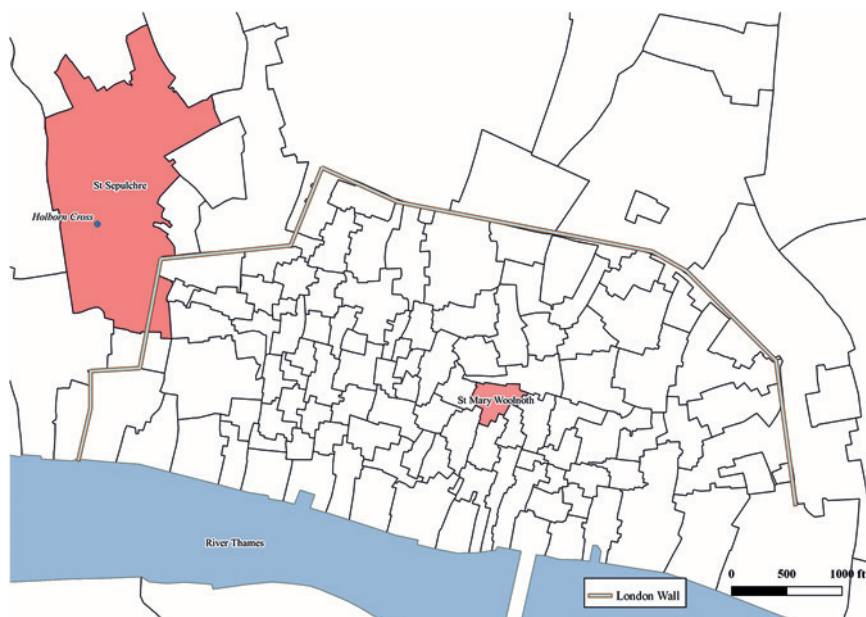


Figure 5.1. Parishes of London c.1520 with locations from Cockerel *contra* Beckett. Base map produced by the Centre for Metropolitan History, Institute of Historical Research, with boundary adjustments by Justin Colson.

multiple social worlds which might exist within a large extramural parish. Agnes Cockerel had apparently moved in disgrace before. At length, both John and Elizabeth Beckett were persuaded to speak. They told Bayly that she had been deceived in letting to Cockerel, since ‘Dyngley her servaunt kepyth her’ (fo. 102) and that she was a prostitute, a ‘brothel of her taylle’ (fo. 101).<sup>33</sup> Dyngley was evidently seen as involved in her sexual transgressions, although whether this was a commercial arrangement or, as Martin Ingram reads the case, an illicit relationship, is ambiguous.<sup>34</sup> The reference to Dyngley keeping her could suggest anything from allowing her to have extramarital sex in the household to the operation of a brothel.<sup>35</sup> In any case, the implication is that Dyngley was not governed as a servant ought to be but had some kind of power over Agnes gained through sex, either as a pimp or as a lover. The ambiguity of the language is highly suggestive of the challenge a female-headed household with a male servant

<sup>33</sup> See n. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, pp. 221–2.

<sup>35</sup> R. H. Helmholz, ‘Harboring sexual offenders: ecclesiastical courts and controlling misbehavior’, *Jour. Brit. Stud.*, xxxvii (1998), 258–68.

posed to early sixteenth-century norms of social control. The Becketts also warned Bayly about Cockerel's reliability as a tenant and that Bayly ought to be wary 'that she do not pute yow clene ought of your howse for ye shall fynde hyr a crafty dame' (fo. 100).

We have no way of knowing the judgment in Agnes Cockerel's case, nor the specific questions and allegations put to deponents. Although we do not know the precise contentions of Agnes's case, it seems clear from the response of witnesses that she sued the Becketts for what they told Alice Bayly, her prospective landlady. Presumably, those words cost Agnes the lease of her new home. Neither Agnes herself nor the Becketts were examined, unlike in other cases, which may suggest a swift conclusion. However, the outcome of the case is of far less importance than what it suggests about the workings of reputation or *fama* in London neighbourhoods and the difficulties, in an oral society, that movement around the city posed.

Agnes's case concerned compelled movement but also, in its detail, voluntary migration. Agnes Cockerel herself had probably lived in two places in the parish of St. Sepulchre without Newgate. She had most likely only moved to her latest house about six months before being expelled in June 1521, given that, during his deposition in November, John Gruege claimed to have known her about a year. It is perhaps not surprising that John Beckett could refer to Agnes having previous neighbours within the same parish, given its size as outlined above. St. Mary Woolnoth, the London parish where Alice Bayly's house lay, by contrast covered a very small area in heart of the city along Lombard Street, a busy commercial route. It was described as having 300 communicants in 1548, compared with St. Sepulchre's 3,400.<sup>36</sup> Although only a short walk away, one would pass through more than ten other parishes in travelling between the two. It also seems that Agnes had moved greater distances in the past. Richard Holand referred to having known Agnes at 'Turney': this was probably Tournai, on the boundary between Hainault and Flanders. From 1513–9 the city was under English rule as part of Henry VIII's claim to the French crown. Holand's claim to have known Agnes seven or eight years before the date of the case (1521) would place them both in the city during its English occupation.<sup>37</sup> She was evidently no stranger to migration and apparently took her poor reputation with her wherever she went.

Some careful reading of the depositions therefore reveals Agnes Cockerel's highly mobile life, but she was not alone in this. We have already seen that Richard Holand and Widow Bayly, his mistress, were both born in

<sup>36</sup> Kitching, *London and Middlesex Chantry Certificate*, pp. 23–4.

<sup>37</sup> C. S. L. Davies, 'Tournai and the English crown, 1513–1519', *Hist. Jour.*, xli (1998), 1–26.

north Wales. Twenty-nine-year-old Holand must have been a well-travelled man, having gone from Wales to London via Tournai. Within London itself he had also moved, living with Bayly in St. Mary Woolnoth during his apprenticeship and then, between the events of the case and his deposition, moving to St. Giles Cripplegate on the northern edge of the city. Widow Bayly also moved after Holand's apprenticeship, to the parish of St. Michael Bassishaw. Since she was sixty-nine years old, Holand was perhaps her last apprentice and her move may signal her retirement from tailoring.

Like most late medieval town dwellers, Londoners were a very mobile group; high urban mortality rates meant that most residents had been born elsewhere and migrated to the city.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, attitudes to those perceived as 'outsiders' could be hostile, particularly at times of communal tension. Locative insults such as 'skotts drab' and 'Lumberd knave' featured in consistory cases, where they were used to defame aliens (that is, non-English immigrants).<sup>39</sup> As Laura Gowing has argued of such insults in a slightly later period, they symbolically exiled the target from the city, undermining their right to local belonging.<sup>40</sup> Xenophobia was a recurrent aspect of London society, from the violence against the Flemish in the 1381 rising to attacks on alien property on 'Evil May Day' in 1517, just four years before the events of the case discussed here. Richard Holand was referred to as a 'foren' by a witness in the Cockerel case who did not know him, a term with a specific legal meaning in a civic context. 'Foreigns' were those who visited or lived in the city and practised an occupation but were not citizens.<sup>41</sup> However, Holand was an apprentice at the time of the incidents described so the use of the term in relation to him was inaccurate in a strict legal sense. Instead, it suggests how perceptions of belonging were subjective and mutable. Holand's highly mobile life, from Wales to London via Tournai, perhaps left traces in his accent that might have led others to assume he was a 'foreign'. However, suspicion around mobility was not just directed at those believed to be of legally foreign or alien status. Mobility around the city could itself be a cause for suspicion.

<sup>38</sup> M. Kowaleski, 'Medieval people in town and country: new perspectives from demography and bioarchaeology', *Speculum*, lxxxix (2014), 573–600, at pp. 583–7.

<sup>39</sup> LMA, DL/C/0207, fo. 58; LMA, DL/C/0207, fo. 229v.

<sup>40</sup> L. Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996), p. 67.

<sup>41</sup> See M. P. Davies, 'Citizens and "foreyns": crafts, guilds and regulation in late medieval London', in *Between Regulation and Freedom: Work and Manufactures in European Cities, 14th–18th Centuries*, ed. A. Caracausi, L. Mocarelli and M. Davies (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2018), pp. 1–21.

### *Social knowledge and mobility*

One of the remarkable aspects of Agnes Cockerel's case is that she brought it at all. She claimed defamation against the Becketts for statements about her character when, as far as the witnesses were concerned, the neighbourhood had already decided she was of 'evil conversation'. The mechanisms of ward justice had already acted: the constables had made search, Robert Dyngley and possibly Cockerel had been led to the Counter prison and an order had been made to expel her. Expulsion from the ward was a standard punishment for those who persistently flouted civic authority, more serious than imprisonment and far more common than exemplary trials before the mayor.<sup>42</sup> The ward was the lowest level of civic government, where the priorities of the ruling elite of the city met the concerns and initiative of local residents.<sup>43</sup> Decisions over whom to expel appear to have been made by the ward's alderman rather than local officers or wardmote juries, although it was probably their knowledge and advice which identified potential targets.<sup>44</sup> It is quite striking that throughout the late medieval period the routine means of dealing with offenders remained within the ward itself and generally did not require the expelled to abjure the city completely, other than during concerted morality drives by the civic government and crown.<sup>45</sup> This suggests that the primary nuisance caused by persistent offenders was perceived to be that inflicted on neighbours, a problem which could be solved by moving people along.

Expulsion thus resolved the immediate problem caused by anti-social or disruptive people, especially for aldermen who found themselves petitioned by ward inhabitants demanding they get rid of particular individuals.<sup>46</sup> However, like Agnes Cockerel, those who were expelled might simply move to another part of the city. Margaret Morgan alias Smyth, a witness in a consistory case in the late fifteenth century, had allegedly been expelled from both city wards and an ecclesiastical precinct on multiple occasions.<sup>47</sup> This series of punishments served to deny Margaret a settled existence and reaffirmed her pariah status through repeated expulsion.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, pp. 223–4.

<sup>43</sup> C. M. Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People, 1200–1500* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 121–7.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., a consistory witness named Richard Trussyngton was said to have been indicted by his neighbours at the wardmote for being quarrelsome but that the alderman had spared him expulsion because he found surety for his future good behaviour (LMA, DL/C/207, fo. 268v).

<sup>45</sup> Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, pp. 231–7.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., the deposition of Fulk Pygott, 21 Jan. 1533 (LMA, DL/C/0208, unnumbered folio).

<sup>47</sup> 'Deposition of Margaret Smyth, 4 November 1491', *Consistory Database* <<http://consistory.cohds.ca/obj.php?p=982>> [accessed 11 June 2018].

<sup>48</sup> Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, p. 226.

We can also read the movements of Agnes and Margaret as attempts to outrun their *fama* and find a new place to settle where their reputations might be unknown. In a city of roughly 50–60,000 inhabitants,<sup>49</sup> no one could be known by everyone and knowledge about reputation was generated and circulated within neighbourhoods, of which there were many. London contained over 100 parishes within the jurisdiction of the civic government alone; and in some places a sense of neighbourhood might be even more acute, as suggested by witnesses in consistory depositions. In a case originating in the liberty of the priory of St. John of Jerusalem at St. John's Street near Smithfield Market, a butcher engaged in a bitter dispute with his neighbour exclaimed to his rival's wife, 'thow skotts drab I will bere never a shert to my back but I will have thy husband owte of this strete'.<sup>50</sup> The victim was cast as both an unwanted foreigner and a neighbourhood pariah. Whether by street, parish or precinct, Londoners conducted their social lives to a great degree within the small area around their home and methods of punishment reflected this.

Martin Ingram described early sixteenth-century London as a 'surveillance society', where gossip was used as a means of bringing offences to the attention of authorities.<sup>51</sup> However, it is only within the densely connected social spaces of the neighbourhood, or even the street, that such surveillance could be carried out. Outside them it was impossible for tabs to be kept on every potential malefactor. Medieval conceptions of status were rooted in *fama*, the talk about an individual that 'continually adjusts honor and assigns rank or standing',<sup>52</sup> and thus in the gossip which flowed around neighbourhoods but might struggle to reach beyond their boundaries.<sup>53</sup> Any sense of London as a surveillance society has to be qualified by the inherent limitations of relying on highly localized networks of social knowledge. When Londoners moved around, the flaws in the system could be exposed.

This is an important context for the actions of the Becketts, as portrayed by the deponents. All three deponents agreed that their words were not spoken maliciously; and there is a marked caution in the manner in which John and Elizabeth Beckett approached discussing Agnes Cockerel's reputation with a stranger from another neighbourhood. John took great pains first to move the discussion from the shop to the more private space of

<sup>49</sup> V. Harding, 'The population of London, 1550–1700: a review of the published evidence', *London Jour.*, xv (1990), 111–28, at pp. 112–17.

<sup>50</sup> LMA, DL/C/0207, fo. 58.

<sup>51</sup> Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, p. 194.

<sup>52</sup> Fenster and Smail, 'Introduction', pp. 3–4.

<sup>53</sup> E. Spindler, 'Marginality and social relations in London and the Bruges area, 1370–1440' (unpublished University of Oxford DPhil thesis, 2008), pp. 220–7.



the house interior. In the proceeding discussions both he and Elizabeth are presented as hesitant in substantiating Agnes's bad fame, even attempting to send Alice Bayly to ask her previous neighbours at Holborn Cross before they would speak. Their hesitancy suggests they feared the repercussions of speaking ill of Cockerel, namely the prospect of a defamation case (a fear which proved to be well-founded). By speaking to Bayly the Becketts were in effect acting as linchpins between two parish networks of knowledge about reputation, passing information about Cockerel which was well-attested locally to someone who was unfamiliar in the neighbourhood. It is this element of the case that can be inferred as the motivating factor in Cockerel's attempt to prosecute the Becketts, despite all the evidence of how uncontroversial the fact of her poor reputation and expulsion was within St. Sepulchre parish. It suggests that knowledge which in one place was treated as commonly known fact could be portrayed as defamatory when removed from the social context which legitimated it. In another defamation case, also originating in the parish of St. Sepulchre, a deponent from the neighbouring parish of St. Bride responded to a question about the fame of the case that 'he has nothing to depose because he is unknown in that area'.<sup>54</sup> Despite living just a short distance from the parish where the events had occurred, he was not part of the neighbourhood gossip network which generated and circulated *fama* of people and events. It seems likely that, in moving to the centre of the city, Agnes sought to exploit this 'knowledge gap' between neighbourhoods just as she may have tried to do previously in her move around St. Sepulchre. Thus, the fact that Agnes brought a defamation case seems to have little to do with contesting the grounds for her expulsion and more to be an attempt to hamper the spread of poor *fama* around the city.

Indeed, it was not just those with poor reputations who might seek to use this gap to their advantage. Evidence from a different kind of consistory case, those centring on marital separation and spousal abuse, suggests that moving outside the area in which one was known in London could be a useful strategy for women in desperate circumstances. For many women abused by their husbands their first support network was probably within the parish itself, as Tim Reinke-Williams has noted for early modern London.<sup>55</sup> However, as he makes clear, this depended upon standing in good stead with the community; when a woman lacked a good local reputation, mobility may have been the only option available. Prolonged violence may

<sup>54</sup> LMA, DL/C/0208, fo. 105v.

<sup>55</sup> T. Reinke-Williams, *Women, Work and Sociability in Early Modern London* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 130–1.



also have driven some women away, even when they had local friends, simply to avoid discovery; a number of cases show neighbours were willing to intercede on the part of women who subsequently moved.<sup>56</sup> Certainly, a common feature of these cases was that an abused wife was driven not just to leave the family home, but also the neighbourhood.

Agnes Corbe, for instance, moved to St. Giles Cripplegate in 1516 after she remarried to a man who severely beat her.<sup>57</sup> Both of Agnes's husbands appear to have been butchers and the parish she left, St. Nicholas Shambles, was one of three centres of the city's meat trade. Two of her male servants who deposed in the case remained in the parish but had found new masters among the local butchers in the months between Agnes's flight and the case coming to the consistory. Butchers were one of the most occupationally clustered trades in the city and Agnes's decision to leave the parish may reflect an attempt to escape the local social network in which her husband would have been well-known.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, her experience in the butchery trade perhaps helped her in setting up a new household, as she was able to take her female servant with her to St. Giles.<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Spenser, who also suffered cruel treatment at the hands of her husband Edmund, appears to have moved in the opposite direction, from an extramural parish into the city centre, to escape. The two witnesses in the separation case she brought against Edmund recall their separate dwelling places, Edmund at St. Clement Danes to the west of the city and Elizabeth at London Stone (probably the parish of St. Swithin) in the eastern city centre.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, Edmund seems to have found her, as both the witnesses recalled Edmund drawing his dagger to threaten her at each house.

It is notable that in the cases of Elizabeth Spenser, Agnes Corbe and Agnes Cockerel, all chose to cross the city walls to find new accommodation and in doing so all appear to have attempted, in some way, to evade public fame. They appear to have calculated that the social distance between centre and periphery offered them some protection: for Spenser and Corbe from the attention of their abusive husbands; and for Cockerel from knowledge of her expulsion. We can only speculate as to whether the suspicion aroused

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., Spenser *contra* Spenser (LMA, DL/C/208, fos. 16v–17, 39v).

<sup>57</sup> LMA, DL/C/206, fo. 466.

<sup>58</sup> On the social networks of occupationally clustered craftsmen, see J. Colson, 'Commerce, clusters, and community: a re-evaluation of the occupational geography of London, c.1400–c.1550', *Econ. History Rev.*, lxi (2016), 104–30, at pp. 114–7.

<sup>59</sup> Women commonly knew their husbands' trades well enough to train apprentices and continue in the trade after his death and this is probably the case for Agnes Corbe (LMA, DL/C/206, fos. 467–8).

<sup>60</sup> LMA, DL/C/208, fos. 16v, 39v.

by Cockerel's arrival in her new parish was also experienced by the other women in their search for new accommodation. Perhaps a woman like Agnes Corbe, with experience in an established trade, found it easier to convince others of her suitability as a tenant. Cockerel had told her new landlady she was a midwife, perhaps in an attempt to suggest both financial stability and a legitimate means of supporting herself. Certainly by the later part of the century midwives could be highly respected figures with clients across the city and suburbs and a good reputation which extended beyond their own parish.<sup>61</sup> It may have been true that Agnes was a midwife, but if not it was perhaps a plausible story for a single woman looking to rent a new house. Poor reputation and the suspicious behaviour of occupying tenants posed an embarrassing risk to the reputation of the property owner.<sup>62</sup> Mobility outside the social space in which one's reputation was established thus presented difficulties in finding a place to live even as it offered women an escape from very different social problems.

Crossing the boundary between neighbourhoods might mean passing between different social worlds alive with rumour and gossip about their inhabitants. These were spaces of intense personal scrutiny. This situation produced both, at a local level, the surveillance society suggested by Martin Ingram and, across the city, possibilities for the evasion of social networks and social knowledge while remaining in the same settlement. Moreover, moving from the city within the walls to extramural neighbourhoods, or vice-versa, seems to have offered an additional level of social distance useful to those who needed to escape their *fama*.

### *'Men wer glad that they wer ryd of yow'*

In essence, mobility around the city enabled people to evade one of the primary means of urban social control: the close observation of neighbours. It also transgressed ideals of social control as rooted in the stability of the household. The household was central both to the self-image of burgesses and to the system of security and policing maintained by the civic authorities. All residents of the city were expected to be sworn to keep the peace within their ward through the frankpledge system, whereby adult males were responsible for the actions of women, children, servants and apprentices within their household.<sup>63</sup> This reliance on the subsuming of

<sup>61</sup> D. E. Harkness, 'A view from the streets: women and medical work in Elizabethan London', *Bull. Hist. Med.*, lxxxii (2008), 52–85, at p. 70.

<sup>62</sup> Helmholz, 'Harboring sexual offenders', p. 260.

<sup>63</sup> S. Rees Jones, 'Household, work and the problem of mobile labour: the regulation of labour in medieval English towns', in *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. P. J. P. Goldberg, W. M. Ormrod and J. Bothwell (York, 2000), pp. 33–53.

dependent individuals within a household confirmed its status as a site of patriarchal social control; wise governance of the household was a cornerstone of ideal masculinity for well-to-do Londoners.<sup>64</sup> However, it was a norm which was at odds with the realities of urban life. Sarah Rees Jones has argued that the frankpledge system entrenched difficulties for the working poor.<sup>65</sup> It was a system which presumed stability of residence within the household and which took no account of impermanent living arrangements. The development of small alleyway houses and chambers for rent in the late medieval city provided accommodation for a large group of urban poor including labourers, journeymen, single women, widows and others who were not subsumed into this household model of social control. She has also suggested this was politically important for the divisions between citizens and others in the medieval town. This kind of living arrangement was also impermanent, often based on tenancies at will and sub-tenancy rather than long-term lease-holding.<sup>66</sup> Andrew Wareham has argued that in the seventeenth century this group of Londoners were highly mobile and capable of moving at very short notice when hearth-tax collectors were due to assess their household.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the movement of the poor was increasingly considered problematic in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. From the 1470s onwards there were an increasing number of statutes and frequent civic and royal proclamations against vagrancy; punishment of vagrants became noticeably harsher between the 1510s and 1530s.<sup>68</sup> At the transition from the medieval to early modern periods mobility, especially that of the poor, was increasingly considered problematic and liable to attract suspicion.

The movement of Agnes Cockerel into a new neighbourhood evidently attracted enough suspicion for her background to be checked. The ideal of the stable household, combined with the fact that expulsion enforced mobility for the socially undesirable, sometimes put less affluent newcomers to a parish under suspicion. As part of the vetting of their suitability to depose in the court, witnesses were usually asked to give an account of where they had lived. If they had been present in their current parish for less than two years they were often asked to give a history of residences, sometimes

<sup>64</sup> S. McSheffrey, 'Man and masculinity in late medieval London civic culture: governance, patriarchy and reputation', in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, ed. J. Murray (New York, 1999), pp. 243–78, at pp. 245–66.

<sup>65</sup> Rees Jones, 'Household', pp. 143–4, 149–50, 151–2.

<sup>66</sup> S. Rees Jones, *York: the Making of a City 1068–1350* (Oxford, 2013), p. 273.

<sup>67</sup> A. Wareham, 'The unpopularity of the hearth tax and the social geography of London in 1666', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, lxx (2017), 452–82, at p. 464.

<sup>68</sup> M. K. McIntosh, *Poor Relief in England, 1350–1600* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 43–4, 121–3.

extending all the way back to their birth. In the prevailing climate of suspicion, witnesses were alert to the aspersions that could be cast on their character by dint of their movement. On occasion they manipulated their presentations of themselves to the court, casting themselves as reliable and respectable people by smoothing over histories of mobility. Henry Wylsher or Wyther, a tailor who appeared as a witness at the consistory court in January 1533, said he lived temporarily in the parish of Hendon but before that had been resident in Totteridge, both in Middlesex, for five years. A counter-witness asserted that he was not a man of sufficient means to be considered a reliable witness because he is 'a tailor, having no fixed abode ... but he goes here and there wherever he can get his living'.<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Weston, a twenty-seven-year-old servant called as a witness in 1512, went to great lengths to explain part of her residence history. She said she was born in Cockermouth in Cumberland but had lived in the parish of St. Martin in the Fields, Westminster, for eight years, with the exception of nine months spent in the service of a man called Newton in St. Dunstan in the West in London. Elizabeth went on to explain that she had only departed St. Martin's 'to fulfil her position in the service of a good man' and that she left his service after nine months by mutual agreement.<sup>70</sup> This was far more detail about a past residence than most other witnesses gave and suggests a certain anxiety on Elizabeth's part about how her movement around the city would be perceived and how it could affect her reputation. Perhaps she sought to pre-empt assumptions that she had breached her service contract or even that the nine months away from her parish were related to an illicit pregnancy. In the act of witnessing, these deponents had to defend their reputations and assert their sufficient status to give testimony. They thus sought to explain or hide histories of movement which might be used by counter witnesses to denigrate them and their reputations. Those who moved to a new neighbourhood would not have wanted insinuations that circumstances like those of Agnes Cockerel had caused them to move.

While the poor, or women moving on their own, may have been particularly liable to such accusations, another case suggests that even those with quite a high social status could face hostility because of their movement. In May 1532 a meeting of 'certain of the parishioners' of St. Clement Eastcheap descended into acrimony when James Pott grumbled about being imposed with a greater assessment than usual after everyone else had agreed to the new charges for the parish clerk's wages.<sup>71</sup> Such a

<sup>69</sup> Deposition of John Hayward, 1 March 1533 (LMA, DL/C/0208, unnumbered folio).

<sup>70</sup> LMA, DL/C/0206, fo. 168.

<sup>71</sup> Deposition of Benedict Jackson, 8 July 1532 (LMA, DL/C/208, unnumbered folio).

meeting would have been made up of the better-off members of the parish who had a say in local decision making.<sup>72</sup> Pott's fellow parishioner John Hooke became so frustrated with Pott's complaints that he angrily proposed paying Pott's increase himself and removing Pott's wife from her accustomed pew in church 'rather then we wyll have all this brablyng'.<sup>73</sup> Hooke went on to exclaim 'ye made a brablyng her as ye have in other parishes as ye have com from'. Pott responded, '[What] parishes be that?'; and Hooke said, 'from St. Marten Orgor and St. [Christopher] at Stockes for ther men wer glad that they wer ryd of yow'.<sup>74</sup> In Pott's own testimony he claimed Hooke had accused him of being 'driven out of diverse parishes', perhaps an exaggeration of Hooke's intent but nonetheless suggestive of the stinging insult perceived in his words.<sup>75</sup> In his anger, it was to Pott's movement around the city that Hooke turned as an insult, focusing on an aspect of his life which could be reinterpreted as potentially suspicious. This case suggests mobility as a kind of liminal state, open to insinuation even for a member of the parish elite.

Of course, not everyone who moved would automatically come under suspicion. Neighbourhood migration was very common in late medieval and early modern London, albeit that the poor probably kept moving throughout their time in the city while others tended to move as a response to life-cycle changes such as household formation or widowhood.<sup>76</sup> Context is important in understanding when mobility might have had deleterious effects on reputation. For those with an obvious reason for movement, such as becoming master of their own household, the move was perhaps perceived positively and they could quickly be integrated into a new neighbourhood. Having social contacts gained through an occupation or company membership may also have helped. For instance, twenty-eight-year-old William Grene, a butcher, had moved from one community engaged in the preparation and sale of meat at St. Nicholas Shambles to another at the St. John's Street liberty about two years before he appeared at the consistory in February 1521. Despite being a relative newcomer, he was referred to respectfully as 'neybor Grene' and asked to

<sup>72</sup> C. Burgess, 'Shaping the parish: St. Mary at Hill, London, in the fifteenth century', in *The Cloister and the World: Essays in Medieval History in Honour of Barbara Harvey*, ed. J. Blair and B. Golding (Oxford, 1996), pp. 246–85.

<sup>73</sup> Deposition of John Knyll, 8 July 1532 (LMA, DL/C/208, unnumbered folio).

<sup>74</sup> Deposition of John Knyll.

<sup>75</sup> Deposition of James Pott, 15 Nov. 1532 (LMA, DL/C/208, unnumbered folio).

<sup>76</sup> J. Boulton, 'Neighbourhood migration in early modern London', in Clark and Souden, *Migration and Society*, pp. 107–49, at pp. 120–1; on neighbourhood migration and its relationship to life cycle in late medieval London, see C. Berry, 'Margins and marginality', pp. 195–8.

inspect some pig carcasses in a conversation recalled in his deposition.<sup>77</sup> For Grene, who had been a journeyman butcher before his move to St. John's Street, where he became a householder, his move and integration into a new neighbourhood would have been eased by occupational connections as well as the augmented social status gained by establishing his own household.

William Grene's situation contrasts with that of Agnes Cockerel, Agnes Corbe and Elizabeth Spenser. Unlike Grene, their mobility was not a positive choice which aimed to increase their social standing but was enforced by circumstance. Although they may well have been assisted by social networks not referred to in their depositions, choosing a new place to live was informed by the need to avoid public attention to their whereabouts. The basis of reputation in a locality and the fact of a mobile urban population meant that systems of social control and surveillance in London could only be partial. In the cases of both Agnes Cockerel and James Pott, it is evident that Londoners were aware of this gap and sought to exploit it for their own ends. For the former, it could be exploited by an individual as part of their management of their own reputation. For the latter, the gap allowed a man of apparently middling status to have insinuations cast on his past behaviour and the reasons for his movement around the city. The reliance on ward expulsions as a civic punishment may well have served to strengthen the potentially suspicious air surrounding movement, especially for women who were both disproportionately likely to be indicted at wardmotes and less able to challenge local decisions.<sup>78</sup>

### *Mobility across the walls*

A final aspect to the case of Agnes Cockerel is her choice of home and her move from the extramural periphery of London to a parish at the heart of the walled city. While for William Grene a move across the walls came through occupational connections, Agnes's attempts to evade gossip of her expulsion suggests she was hoping for a lack of social connections between the two parishes. Indeed, extramural parishes had distinctive socio-economic characteristics, particularly in terms of the profile of occupations among their inhabitants and levels of uptake of citizenship, which meant that the social gap between intramural and extramural neighbourhoods may have been greater than that between other city parishes.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> LMA, DL/C/207, fo. 33v.

<sup>78</sup> Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, p. 226.

<sup>79</sup> Berry, 'Margins and marginality', pp. III–2.

For those travelling in the opposite direction, from city centre to suburbs, there may have been additional attractions beyond the walls. The precincts of religious houses and liberties exempt from civic jurisdiction were magnets for those making a living in prostitution or otherwise living at the very fringes of urban life. As Shannon McSheffrey has discussed in a detailed analysis of the consistory case in which Margaret Morgan appeared as a deponent, residents of the precincts had their own social networks which might extend across the liberties in the vicinity of London.<sup>80</sup> Movement into a precinct would seem a good option for those who had been formally expelled from a ward due to their immunity from civic jurisdiction. Under other circumstances, the enclosed nature of the precincts might provide a very physical form of protection. Eleanor Brownynge ran to the house of the sisters within the precinct of St. Bartholomew's hospital in spring 1473 when her husband Alexander chased her with a drawn dagger. The nuns admitted her and closed the door against Alexander, an action which, in the judgment of witnesses, saved her life.<sup>81</sup>

London offered the opportunity for its residents to move when necessary but retain access to the city's economy. Whether moving to a neighbourhood outside the walls or a walled precinct or, indeed, from such spaces to a city-centre parish, Londoners who needed to outrun their reputation or otherwise avoid detection could do so by moving less than a mile. Given that London was far larger than any other English town in the period, such an opportunity must have been rare elsewhere in the country. Nonetheless, we should not underestimate the challenges of maintaining such an existence, especially given the prejudice against ungoverned mobility. While the multiple social spaces of the city enabled those on the fringes of urban life to be flexible, anonymity was at best an ambiguous blessing in a society which valued *fama* as tool for the creation of hierarchy and affirmation of social relations.

## Conclusion

Examination of the consistory depositions can offer more than just an understanding of moral misdemeanours and social control. Caroline Barron's work has given us a rich understanding of the framework of institutions which governed life in the late medieval city, but she has also explored the lives of individual Londoners both within and beyond the civic record. As this chapter has shown, the way that depositions centre on personal reputation for those of middling and lower status in the city

<sup>80</sup> McSheffrey, 'Liberties of London', pp. 223–4.

<sup>81</sup> LMA, DL/C/205, fo. 203r–v.



allows us to understand how they negotiated their place in urban society. Their lives were affected by interactions with civic and other forms of authority, but the authority they had to deal with most regularly was the court of neighbourhood opinion. The close observation of behaviour by neighbours which underpinned structures of social control and punishment was frustrated by the propensity of Londoners to move around. Leaving a neighbourhood could mean the loss of the social knowledge which anchored reputation and credit; mobility was a liberation of a kind but also a risky pursuit.