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LONDON AS A CENTRE FOR DEFINING MODELS OF LUXURY CONSUMPTION IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

I walked around the town taking in the stalls which abounded in the most varied foreign wares, Portuguese, Indian merchandise; and I am not sure if there is anything lacking to suit the tastes and whims of whoever it might be –

and so in the summer of 1678 the Lithuanian squire Teodor Billewicz summed up his observations on the question of the trade and availability in London of various products.¹ The words of this visitor from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth may indeed be interpreted as evidence that he was greatly impressed with the economic life of the English capital, this being even more so given that he had already managed to visit Italy and France where he had had the opportunity of examine the functioning of their metropolises. This may be taken as further proof that seventeenth-century London was perceived by contemporaries as an important European centre for trade and consumption, including the consumption of luxury goods, for it was this that Billewicz presumably had in mind using the expression ‘merchandise’.²

The key role played by London in the development of the internal market for the whole of England as well as its significance as the main centre for luxury consumption and the shaping of new consumption models and fashions has also been confirmed by numerous pieces

¹ Teodor Billewicz, *Diariusz podróży po Europie w latach 1677–1678*, ed. Marek Kunicki-Goldfinger (Warsaw, 2004), 305.

² On the problem of what might lie behind the concept of luxury consumption cf. Adam Manikowski, ‘Luksusowe nieporozumienia’, in Antoni Mączak (ed.), *Europa i świat w początkach epoki nowożytnej*, i: *Spółczeństwo, kultura, ekspansja* (Warsaw, 1991), 109–10.

of research.³ They concentrate not only on the dimensions of this consumption as well as other aspects possible to present within the quantitative approach, but also on the wider social and economic context and even the political aspects. For it follows to remember that in the mid seventeenth century the English capital had undergone an almost thirty year period of turbulence which was to have had a undoubted influence on its economic life. The 1640s and 1650s had been connected with the unrest resulting from political changes of the period of the civil wars and the Republic, while in the mid 1660s the city had been seriously destroyed by the Great Fire and its population decimated by the plague.

Taking into consideration these facts one may ask the question as to how London managed to overcome these difficulties so quickly and why these did not act as a break on its economic development. On the one hand this was presumably the effect of the already established domination of the city over the rest of the country, domination which was helped by the gradual weakening of the position of smaller traditional centres during the incessant growth in the activity of entrepreneurs associated with the City, including those involved in international trade. In effect London became the main centre of economic and trade activity as well as for the assembly of capital and this was not to change even when, with time, a part of production was gradually to be transferred to other parts of the country. This domination was also the effect of other factors, such as the demographic potential of the city, its favourable geographical location, as well as the policies of the first Stuarts, who in the first half of the seventeenth century located within the capital production centres under their sponsorship.⁴ Equally significant – possibly even more so from the point of view of the luxury consumption of interest to us – was the political and social significance of the capital and the realities of the market functioning within it.

³ On the subject of works on consumption in general, not only of luxury goods cf. *Consumption and Culture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Bibliography*, compiled by Dorothy K. Auyong, Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter (Los Angeles, 1991); Sara Pennell, 'Consumption and Consumerism in Early Modern England', *The Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 549–64. One of the newest works exclusively on luxury consumption in England is the work by Linda Levy Peck, *Consuming Splendor: Society and Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2005).

⁴ Francis Sheppard, *London: A History* (Oxford, 1998), 135 ff.

The aim of the present text is the depiction of these very realities with particular attention being paid to the perfecting of forms of trade exchange and the arising of new models of consumption as well as the influence they had on creating demand for luxury goods both in London itself as well as outside the capital. These questions seem to be sufficiently worthwhile in consideration, for they could be regarded as the first, although still modest, signals of the newly dominating phenomenon, which was to appear in the eighteenth-century England and was connected with the process of industrialization, involving making goods which had previously been confined to a limited group of recipients available to a wider public, and is most often referred to by historians as a *consumer revolution*.⁵

We shall start therefore from a presentation of the factors that were instrumental in the appearance of the impulse for the consumption of goods considered as luxurious, as well as the creation of a fashion for a given product. For certain, when compared to the rest of England, London possessed much better conditions for the development of conduct of this type. The closeness of Westminster, i.e. the permanent seat of the royal court, and subsequently that of the Republic as well as the development of the city in a westerly direction (with Covent Garden representing the best example⁶) meant that already in the first half of the seventeenth century the local market of goods – directed towards recipients from the court elites, well situated representatives of professions connected with state administration such as lawyers, and also rich landowners coming to London on business or for parliamentary sessions or court hearings – was functioning perfectly.⁷

⁵ This concept was presented by John Brewer, Neil McKendrick and John H. Plumb in the work *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization on Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, 1982). Later research fairly convincingly shows, however, that this change may be somewhat taken back in time; as argue equally Lorna Weatherill and Linda Levy Peck – this was rather a longer process beginning already in the sixteenth century and reaching its peak in the second half of the seventeenth century and the first two decades of the eighteenth century, cf. Cissie Fairchild, 'Consumption in Early Modern Europe: A Review Article', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35 (1993), 851–2. Peck, *Consuming Splendor*, 352–3.

⁶ On the policy of both James and Charles in relation to the development of the West End and the characteristics of this part of London, see R. Malcolm Smuts, 'The Court and Its Neighbourhood: Royal Policy and Urban Growth in the Early Stuart West End', *Journal of British Studies*, 30 (1991), 117–49.

⁷ Sheppard, *London*, 131–2.

In the 1680s this phenomenon was summed up by the anonymous author of a compendium for prospective merchants:

It is the mighty Randevouz of Nobility, Gentry Courtiers, Divines, Lawyers, Physitians, Merchants, Seamen and all kind of excellent Artificers, of the most refined Wits, and most excellent Beauties.⁸

He equally emphasized that the city was a magnet for drawing the inhabitants of other parts of the country (with them being at the same time the most able and the most ambitious) thanks to it containing parliament, courts, the Inns of Court, the state authorities as well as the residences of the aristocracy.⁹ In effect there appeared in London numerous influential groups with the appropriate funds at their disposal and/or possessing the ambitions to build up their position and prestige equally through external signs such as clothing and lifestyle, *etc.* It also follows to remember about the permanent inhabitants of the city, and here especially about the merchants, who equally had at their disposal the appropriate funds to allow them to actively participate in the consumption of luxury goods, and also often displaying sizeable aspirations.

Considering the fact that a part of the temporary inhabitants mentioned here, such as representatives of the aristocracy, rich landowners or local elites had sufficient financial resources or access to credit and were prepared at least in part to devote the said to luxury consumption, one may presume that this significantly affected its level in the city. This occurred first and foremost *via* the 'powering' of the economy for particular products. Such goods like silver, watches, jewels, glass, decorative fabrics or expensive materials and accessories played an important role in their daily lives. These were not exclusively objects of a purely consumer character or signs of status, for they often inscribed themselves in the functioning of the court and the system of patronage. It was usually these that constituted the presents given to mark the new year or family celebrations to friends, members of the family, patrons or well-connected individuals, on whose favour one counted (e.g. the royal favourite – the famous instance of presents for the Earl of Somerset

⁸ [H.N.] *The Compleat Tradesman, or the exact Dealers Daily Companion...* (London 1684), 5.

⁹ Sheppard, *London*, 131.

on the occasion of his marriage with Frances Howard could serve here as an example¹⁰). In effect the court and those connected with it created a system of distribution and redistribution of luxury goods, which in the main came to them through the intermediacy of London merchants or producers.¹¹

Some of the representatives of the above mentioned groups would return to their place of origin after a certain time and undoubtedly were able to popularize the models adopted during their stay in London. There appeared such situations, however, in which even geographical distance from the capital did not exclude participation in the consumption of the goods here available. Its characteristic manifestation was the appearance of the institution of an agent supplying his clients with the goods not available in the place of actual abode (about this more later).

Next to the presence of potential recipients as a deciding element in London's domination as the centre of luxury consumption as well as the introduction of new models of consumption in England, it follows to remember, however, also about other factors. The claim that the most important of these was the easy access in London to the appropriate products is obviously a truism. For there is no doubt that in the period of interest to us the city was continuously the largest internal and foreign trade centre in the British Isles, and at the same time was becoming one of the most important economic centres in Europe.

In a wider dimension this meant that the vast majority of luxury goods imported to Great Britain were brought in by London merchants associated with London trading companies and brought in on craft belonging to them. They were then put into warehouses and distributed either for wholesale or already for retail. On a narrower more practical level it allowed Londoners or anyone visiting the capital to obtain goods here much easier than anywhere else, it also gave the possibility to become acquainted with novelties and to choose from various types of goods, differing both in terms of price as in quality. This was made easy by the functioning in the capital of a developed

¹⁰ *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. Norman E. McClure, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1939), i, 496.

¹¹ Cf. Linda Levy Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (London, 1993), 18–22.

retail network – the already quoted author of *The Compleat Tradesman* recalled in the mid 1680s that there were 10,000 shops in London, many more than, for example, in Amsterdam.¹² On the whole their owners were employed in the production or import and sale of a specific type of product, but with time the scope and range of individual merchants have broadened. An excellent example of this are apothecaries, who gradually brought into their range of goods products such as chocolate, coffee, exotic fruits and perfume and which, until they became widely available in the eighteenth century, belonged to the group of luxury goods.¹³

Shops specializing in the sale of particular types of goods were traditionally often located in the same district. It was, for example, widely known that jewellery and other gold products as well as leather goods were first and foremost sold on Cheapside, while books and prints in the vicinity of Paternoster Row and St Paul's Cathedral. Slightly more widely spread over the area of the city were apothecary's shops, although here also can be seen a certain regularity for on the whole they were situated in the richer parts of London – in the City in the areas around Fleet Street and Bucklersbury (here one may speak of a domination of this type of shop in the district) and Cheapside, while later also in the vicinity of Westminster, the Strand, Holborn and the Old Bailey.¹⁴

However, at the end of the sixteenth and in the first half of the seventeenth century, there started to appear alongside traditional forms of selling new solutions making access to various forms of goods easier and increasing the choice possibilities for potential customers, ones consequently conducive to stimulating the market for luxury goods. These solutions meant that the process of acquiring particular goods stopped being limited to the satisfaction of needs and the selection of a given type of good, whose acquisition from the point of view of the purchaser was essential or desired, and started to constitute its own form of social activity. In other words, we may already talk about changes – in London's case, at the start of the seventeenth century – in the way in which luxury goods were acquired, which was

¹² [H.N.] *The Compleat Tradesman*, 17.

¹³ Patrick Wallis, 'Consumption, Retailing, and Medicine in Early-Modern London', *Economic History Review*, 61 (2008), 29.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 31–2.

to gradually lead to a situation whereby in the eighteenth century shopping became for certain social circles 'polite' social intercourse.

In 1566 the Royal Exchange was opened, modelled on the exchange in Antwerp. It was the place of business meetings for London and foreign merchants, at the same time – a centre of trade with several score of small shops located on two floors of the building.¹⁵ The market became almost immediately one of the most important points on the city's trade map, however, its significance as a place for the distribution of luxury goods quickly started to decline. This was connected with its location in the City, for at this time buyers of this type of product started to move en masse to the vicinity of Westminster and Whitehall. With these in mind Robert Cecil created in 1609 the New Exchange as competition for the old one. This undertaking of the Earl of Salisbury was not only to bring him and his descendants profit (for the New Exchange remained in the hands of the Cecils, who managed it) but was to change in a significant way the trade topography of London. Situated at the Strand close to Whitehall and the buoyantly developing parish of St Martin-in-the-Fields – the terrain of which was a popular location for those connected with the court to live, from high ranking officials through courtiers to the craftsmen and artists working for the monarch – it became an attractive alternative to the shops located in the City. The number of potential customers of the New Exchange constantly grew – fairly quickly there were to be found amongst them individuals associated with the nearby Inns of Court while in the 1630s together with the founding of Covent Garden, there appeared a subsequent group of well situated buyers in search of various types of luxury goods necessary in the fitting out of their new seats (glass, porcelain, fabrics, *etc.*).¹⁶

The opening of the New Exchange not only weakened the position of the City as a centre of retail trade for luxury goods but also brought about other important changes. It enabled products to be purchased in a new way as well as created a new type of public space which influenced the behaviour of those who visited it. Thanks to the situating of shops on various levels as well as along wide walks, and equally the design of the building, the customer had the opportunity to shop in the peace of the individual stalls – though simultaneously

¹⁵ Peck, *Consuming Splendor*, 46.

¹⁶ Smuts, 'The Court', 122–3.

signaling their presence – as well as engaging in contact with other shoppers. This was of particular importance in the case of women who had now found a socially acceptable public space in which they could conduct a lively social life. Men also treated visits to the New Exchange as a form of spending their free time and one which enabled the forging of various types of contact. In the 1660s Samuel Pepys would go there not only with the aim of acquiring necessary items of clothing, accessories or presents for his wife (for he often shopped in the shops of the City, for example at Cheapside), but also in order to meet and chat with friends or simply to kill time in a situation when he had decided not to visit the theatre or go to some other kind of social meeting.¹⁷

The changes in the way shopping was conducted, so significant for the well situated Londoners in their search for luxury products, to a lesser extent also concerned clients from outside of the capital. Obviously in a situation when they were in the city and shopped themselves they were able to experience this directly. However, more often this was concluded by means of intermediaries, who saw to the realization of their orders. Often recourse was made to relatives, acquaintances or servants going to London or those living there permanently. There also existed the possibility of employing a professional agent to conduct purchases. Usually it was the aristocracy based outside the capital who utilized this type of service, although often as if ‘in passing’, their agents served not only them and their immediate families, but also people connected with them. The work of the agent, who involved himself in searching for, acquiring, and subsequently despatching the appropriate product to the client did not usually merely limit itself to purchase acquisition (for they were often most detailed and pointed to the fact that the person placing the order was perfectly aware of the latest fashions and trends in force in the capital). Often he tried to obtain the best possible price for a given product, conduct negotiations with the sellers or was responsible for the financial side of the transaction using his own funds or credit. An important task for the agent was finding a balance between the demands of the ordering party and the realities in effect on the London market, which often involved the necessity of proposing an alternative for the goods ordered, which could be at the time unavail-

¹⁷ Peck, *Consuming Splendor*, 59–60.

able or whose price had noticeably risen exceeding that which the ordering party was prepared to pay.¹⁸ In effect those acting as agents, at least those who were the most active, could to a decisive degree influence what goods reached clients outside of the city, although it follows to emphasize once again that these on the whole had pretty specified expectations.

Other factors were to equally influence the formation of these new models of consumption, such as the activities of London merchants and producers aimed at enhancing demand for these new products or the creation of advertisements themselves.¹⁹ This was connected with the policy initiated by James I and continued by his successor of introducing new luxury products produced in England as a substitute for imports as well as the support shown for home grown manufacturers.²⁰ For both rulers brought about the creation of numerous factories producing, among other things, high quality glass, silk and decorative cloth, in which to a large degree the experience of European producers was utilized – not merely the copying of designs popular on the Continent but first and foremost the bringing to England of workers who were to train the local craftsmen in these new plants. We can particularly learn a lot about this type of activity from the reports of the highly worried Venetian diplomats. There were brought in, among others, glass blowers and workers from Murano, thanks to whom intensive production of glassware in England was initiated in the second decade of the seventeenth century.²¹ In addition James I decided on the introduction of a ban on the import of glass from the Continent, which, although this was removed with time, did mean that local production developed at an extraordinary rate while the importers themselves started to withdraw from their activities as they had become unprofitable.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 37–40.

¹⁹ John Styles, 'Product Innovation in Early Modern London', *Past and Present*, 168 (Aug. 2000), 128–9.

²⁰ It is worth mentioning that in promoting glass production in England James I many times used the monopoly system criticized by Parliament. A monopoly to produce glass was obtained in 1615 by Sir Robert Mansell, who made use of it until the early 1640s when the Long Parliament abolished all patents still in force, Peck, *Consuming Splendor*, 76–8.

²¹ *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice*, vol. 17, 1621–1623, ed. Allen B. Hinds (London, 1911), 269.

James's and Charles' intention was not simply the limiting of imports and their replacement with domestic production but also with time the initiation of production for export. Such plans were certainly the case for the tapestries produced at Mortlake. Here also specialists were brought in from abroad (Flemish weavers) and an even greater role was attached to pattern-designing. Famous became the series of fabrics depicting the scenes from the Acts of the Apostles based on the Raphael Cartoons, purchased by Charles for this end.²² In effect there was created a production centre for the orders of the monarch, the court, the aristocracy and other wealthy recipients, but equally sending its wares to the Continent, where they enjoyed great popularity. This centre was to even survive the turmoil of the civil wars and continued its production throughout the 1650s.

There is no doubt that such activities enabled the range of luxury goods available in London to be noticeably increased as well as more effectively created fashion for new merchandise. The main aim of the producers was, however, not simply creating, on the basis of an imported good its substitute, but also stimulating demand for their product. An excellent example of such a situation could be the popularity of silver teapots, discussed by John Styles, which, with time, forced the porcelain and stoneware varieties brought from China and Japan to almost disappear from use.²³

The appearance of the silver teapot was to a certain degree connected to the fact that tea, as opposed to coffee which in the 1660s was already widely consumed in the numerous London coffeehouses, was still a fairly elitist product and was, when compared to coffee, much

²² David Jenkins (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Western Textiles* (Cambridge, 2003), 608–9. In the text the year when the works at Mortlake was founded has been incorrectly given as 1519 instead of 1619.

²³ Styles, 'Product Innovation', 140–8. Styles underlines first and foremost that 'producing objects that combined the new with familiar was not simply a strategy for facilitating English consumers' acceptance of innovation. It was a crucial way in which London producers in one material responded to product innovation in another, often as a part of a wider process of import substitution', and only to a limited degree draws attention to the process of cementing demand for a new product (p. 146). In his opinion the question as to what degree the fashion for using silver teapots was engineered by their producers and to what degree their production was undertaken as a result of demand expressed by clients remains an open one, though it is difficult not to be of the view that the activities of the producers were key here.

more expensive. Its preparation required the appropriate equipment – initially almost always imported from the Far East and made from porcelain or stoneware (e.g. from the popular Yixing stoneware from the regions of China most frequently visited by Europeans). It is a fact that their import was made difficult and their high price meant that fairly quickly Europeans, including London producers, started to create imitations. These were on the whole ceramic copies though in the second half of the 1660s there started to appear teapots made of silver, copying the oriental design or referring to it. Despite the fact that silver as a material used for the preparation and serving of hot drinks was not particularly practical and there was the need to introduce safeguards to protect the user from scalding (e.g. a wooden or leather covered handle) a fashion for it set in. This was probably connected to the fact that silver services were considered a luxury product and the tea served from them was very expensive. This allowed the producers of silver teapots to popularize them on the newly developing market of products connected with the exotic drinks that were enjoying increasing popularity, such as tea or chocolate, and which had been dominated to date by ceramic products.

Undoubtedly advertising had a certain influence on creating new models of luxury consumption within the period of interest to us, and here particularly press advertising, although further research is required to establish its range and effectiveness.²⁴ The most widely employed form of informing the public about a new product was usually its direct presentation to potential buyers by the sellers themselves or shop owners as well as travelling street sellers. Merchants could, first and foremost, place a new product in the windows of their shops. It is known that already in 1633 one of the London apothecaries used such a method to present the novelty for the English market that was the banana.²⁵ This was by far the simplest form of advertising to be widely employed (we shall recall that the richness of the goods on display in the numerous shops visited by him is emphasized in the fragment of Billewicz's text cited at the beginning). At the same time in a situation where the good was a total novelty or aroused particular interest, such a form of advertising

²⁴ Robin B. Walker, 'Advertising in London Newspapers, 1650–1750', *Business History*, 15 (1973), 113–30.

²⁵ Wallis, 'Consumption, Retailing', 40.

would have ensured additional publicity and have broadcast the name of the shop.

Obviously such basic forms of marketing activity had their limitations. They allowed the sellers to only present their offer to local buyers and agents. The ability to reach a wider group was made possible by print. A breakthrough in the history of advertising appears to be the moment when, from the 1640s, short classified advertisements started to appear in numerous press publications of an informative character, most often on the final pages of newsbooks, usually where space allowed. The birth of press advertising was purely practical in its nature – publishers who decided to utilize for free space in the columns of the periodicals they published, would place there publishing announcements or lists of books available in their bookshops. Only with time did space start to be made available on commercial principles. However, such a form of announcement was not going to have a chance to develop quickly as a result of the situation existing on the press market – in 1655 the authorities undertook measures to limit the number of published newsbooks and gained a fuller control over the press. One of the effects of this action was the significant increase in the price of advertisements in the titles controlled by them (the only ones that had in effect remained on the market), which in turn resulted in a fall in interest in this form of advertising amongst merchants, importers and producers.²⁶ This situation was to improve around 1660, although the advertising of a single product was a relatively rare occurrence. Advertisements usually informed of the opening of a new shop, praised the offers of exiting enterprises or announced the search for lost or stolen goods. At this time, however, there were some publications available of a purely advertising nature, the so-called advertising sheets, containing exclusively announcements and advertisements such as the *Public Adviser*, published from 1657.²⁷

As has been already mentioned the establishment of what actual influence the first press advertisements could have had on the models of luxury consumption is especially difficult (and requires at the very least more detailed research). There is no doubt, however, that their

²⁶ Joseph Frank, *The Beginnings of the English Newspaper, 1620–1660* (Cambridge MA, 1961), 146, 256–7, 266–7.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 258; Walker, 'Advertising', 114.

appearance in the mid seventeenth century was extraordinarily significant from the perspective of the later period. For at the beginning of the eighteenth century it had become sufficiently developed to be one of the main means of informing people about new products, their popularization and the new fashions for possessing them.

In summing up our considerations it seems justifiable to ask oneself the question as to the interdependence of the political situation in England in the seventeenth century and the development of luxury consumption in London, especially as the answer could turn out to be far more complicated than has resulted from existing examinations of these questions. For a fairly long time there dominated the conviction that the boom for luxury goods ended with the abandonment of the capital by the king and his supporters and the city's involvement in the subsequent stages of domestic conflict, as well as the taking of power by the republicans with their hostile attitude to this type of consumption. The impulse for a change in the situation was to have been the Restoration of the Stuarts and the return of the royal court to Whitehall. The latest research suggests, however, that regardless of political turbulence and the limitation on trade in the early 1640s, both production as equally demand for luxury goods in London for the period of the Republic and Protectorate avoided a crash, and despite the seemingly unfavourable conditions, import and trade with the colonies developed fairly buoyantly.²⁸ The new authorities even continued certain projects from the earlier period, e.g. they supported the silk weaving that had been initiated under James I and allowed the works at Mortlake to continue their activities.²⁹

This specific form of continuity means that the thesis suggesting that it was in fact the seventeenth century, despite all the political and economic complications connected with the civil wars, and the subsequent changes of government, that was to have a key part to play in the development of the forms of luxury consumption dominating in the subsequent century, when new social groups joined in and when consumption was to have indicated not affiliation with the court elites but membership of the middle class, becomes most convincing.³⁰

²⁸ Peck, *Consuming Splendor*, 235.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 275.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 352. The author debates here with the arguments presented by John Brewer, Peter Earle and Maxine Berg, who are of the view that in the earlier period

For it was the seventeenth century that saw the adoption of certain solutions that made easier the expansion of the circle of consumers, like, for instance, the techniques of retail and advertising, which in the course of subsequent decades were to play an increasingly larger role in the transformation of English society.

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(i.e. the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) luxury consumption was exclusively linked to the royal court, though the situation underwent change in the eighteenth century.