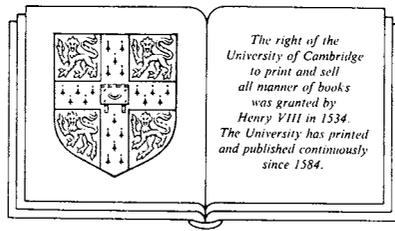


# THE CELYS AND THEIR WORLD

*An English merchant family  
of the fifteenth century*

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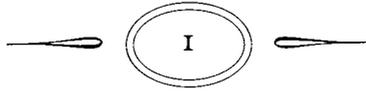
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## THE CELY FAMILY AND THEIR BACKGROUND

Sometime around the mid-fifteenth century the three Cely boys, Robert, Richard and George, were born to an established wool-merchant, Richard Cely senior, and his wife Agnes. The elder Richard was a worshipful citizen of London, proud to be designated 'merchant of the Fellowship of the Staple at Calais'. He was, it seems, in a minority among the larger exporters of raw wool, in that the wool trade constituted his main business interest. Many of the leading staplers of the period were also merchant adventurers, importing and exporting a variety of other goods in addition to their trade at the Calais wool staple, the only authorized point at which good quality English wool might be sold abroad. But although Richard was not one of the richest or most influential men in City politics, by the time that the Cely papers begin, about 1473, he was a man of substance, with a town-house in a desirable area of London, an estate in Essex, and other land in Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire, and was enjoying the seniority in his Company which past office-holding and long continuance conferred.

There can be little doubt that merchants (that is, men engaged in wholesale trade) thought of themselves as forming a distinct class in society, however shifting the outer edges of the stratum, however realistic might be their hopes of marrying daughters into a higher class and of making their sons into landed gentlemen, well-beneficed clergy, or rich and influential lawyers, and however close the threat of the sickness, unlucky venture or political reversal which could overturn a man's fortunes and send him and his children into penury. Poets, preachers, legislators, civic authorities and the heads of his own Company reinforced the merchant's view of himself as a person of dignity, and one distinct from other orders of men. The table of precedence in the commonplace book of the early sixteenth-century merchant Richard Hill even put the merchant immediately after masters in chancery, parsons of churches and secular priests, and before 'gentlemen', artificers and 'a yeoman of good

name'.<sup>1</sup> And citizens of London took pride in the claim that within the city their mayor ranked next to the king himself. William Gregory, himself mayor in 1451, recounted with relish the story of how one of his successors, invited to the feast for the Sergeants of the Coif, found that the Earl of Worcester had been given the place of honour. The mayor promptly walked out, with most of his aldermen. And such were his resources that when an emissary of the rejected hosts arrived at the mayor's quarters, he found in progress a far more magnificent banquet. It included swan, added Gregory importantly.<sup>2</sup>

But one has only to read Peter Laslett's *The World We Have Lost* to perceive that the fifteenth-century merchant had a life-style which barely touches the world there depicted.<sup>3</sup> This is because, as its title suggests, the book reconstructs those aspects of a pre-industrial society which provide the greatest contrast to the twentieth-century picture. In so far as it is true to say that a 'middle-class culture' permeates western civilization today, the fact is that our links with the past extend through the Celys and their fellow citizens, not through the squirearchy of the Pastons and Stonors, endlessly preoccupied with their rights over lands and tenants, and not through the yeomen, husbandmen, and agrarian labourers from whom most of us genetically descend.

For many ambitious young men who had no claim to the landed estates of the gentry proper, a successful career in some branch of overseas trade was as much a high road to fortune in the fifteenth century as it had been in distant Anglo-Saxon times, when a merchant who made three trading voyages with his own ship and acquired certain other signs of secure respectability was held to have earned the status of a *thegn*.<sup>4</sup> In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries manuals circulated which promised to turn the hopeful purchaser into a flourishing businessman. Then, as now, there was a receptive market for such sage advice as

who some ever useth to buy any chaffer, he ought ever to buy it so that he may have reasonable winning thereof toward his living. And it is better a man 'to rue sold than to rear hold', that is to say, rather take a little loss than to lose all. For chaffer is ever more fresher when it is new, and more pleasant to see, than it is when it is old. And there is an old proverb that men say, 'Light winning make an heavy purse', and 'Many small make a great'. For he that hath money may renew his ware every day when he will.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Balliol College, Oxford, MS. 354, fo. 203v.

<sup>2</sup> James Gairdner, ed., *The Historical Collections of a Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century* (Camden Soc., 1876), p. 222.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (2nd edn, London, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society* (Harmondsworth, 1952), p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> 'A Discourse of Weights and Merchandise' (commonly mis-called 'The Number of Weights'), B.L. MS. Cotton Vespasian E. IX, fo. 97v.

The writer of this offered a 'get-rich-quick' formula built around the key-words 'where, what, when, be ware and [in]quisitive' which at least one American business consultant was still employing, in essence, five centuries later.<sup>6</sup>

Such works reflected a buoyant mood in the later fifteenth century, created, it may be, by widening opportunities, a higher standard of living for many people, and greater availability of schooling. But it was all very well to claim that 'there be many poor beginners that prove to thrifty men [i.e. attain prosperity]' provided they remembered to buy penny wares, 'as purses, knives, girdles, glasses, hats', for no more than 8*d* the dozen, halfpenny ware for 4*d*, and farthing ware for 2*d*, and to sell them at a mark-up of 2*d* in the shilling.<sup>7</sup> This advice applied to men 'who march with foot-packs' and other chapmen, who were, however, specifically excluded from apprenticeship in the London Mercers' Company and any share in the privilege and prestige of its members.<sup>8</sup> Young men without capital or connections had little real chance of breaking into the higher ranks of the commercial world.

If entry to these upper echelons of trade was not easy to achieve in one generation, it remains true that those who held that fortunate position were always to some extent 'self-made'. It would therefore be interesting to know the antecedents of Richard Cely senior. But the first certain documentary reference to him occurs in October 1449, when he was among the London staplers named in a list of those who had lent Henry VI 2,000 marks 'for the wages of Henry, Viscount Boucer' (Bourgchier) and others of the Calais garrison, in return for the remission of subsidy dues on some shipments of wool and fell.<sup>9</sup> In 1455 he was one of five leading staplers who, together with the mayor of the Staple, made an indenture with the victualler of Calais, Sir John Cheyne, in the same matter.<sup>10</sup> How he had come to enter the wool trade is not known. Possibly he belonged to a collateral branch of the family of Cely or Sely who had had some prominence in London merchant life throughout the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and subsequently sank in the social scale. In 1459 the main line of that family was represented, in legitimate descent, by Simon Sely, son of John Sely, brewer of London. John's father, who had been heir to certain 'livelihood' in London and Bristol,

<sup>6</sup> Obituary notice of William J. Reilly, Director of the National Institute for Straight Thinking, *New York Times*, 19 Nov. 1970.

<sup>7</sup> 'Discourse', fos. 97v-98.

<sup>8</sup> Laetitia Lyell, ed., *Acts of Court of the Mercers' Company, 1453-1527* (Cambridge, 1936), p. xi.

<sup>9</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1446-52*, p. 315; *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, v, 208. He may also be the Richard Cely given seisin of a tenement and wharves in Thames St in June 1440: Hustings Roll 169 (59).

<sup>10</sup> *C.P.R., 1452-61*, p. 106; *Rot. Parl.* v, 295.

killed a miller in youth and moved about from place to place under the names of John Bartholomew or John Saly. He took up with one Denise Craneford and was finally compelled to marry her, 'thereto right loath, because she was in manner an idiot and had nor knew no worldly reason'. The proof of imbecility adduced by one of her grandsons was that 'she would call a *noble a nubbyll*'.<sup>11</sup>

But the name Cely or Sely (from Old English *sælig* 'blessed') was not uncommon in fifteenth-century England. It is just as likely that Richard, or his immediate forebears, had come to London from some provincial town where the family had settled for a time after succeeding in the process of emancipation and amassment of a little land and capital in their original village, on the pattern which had become familiar in England over the preceding century or two, when 'villein' families who were lucky enough to escape plagues and famines might take advantage of shortages of labour, gradual relaxations in manorial controls and the new availability of land after a fall in population, and attain the new status of 'yeoman'. Some of the more fortunate and enterprising of these set up, in time, as merchants in a town like Leicester, Coventry, Hull, York, Bristol or London itself, as did the Wyggeston, Wyxston or Wigston family whose background is traced in W. G. Hoskins's *The Midland Peasant*.<sup>12</sup> William Wyggeston, who became a substantial merchant and philanthropist in Leicester, was, like the Celys, a member of the Company of the Staple. But the only reference in the Celys' papers to a member of the previous generation is the incidental information that Robert Cely's wife, who died in 1479, was buried in London beside his grandmother.<sup>13</sup> Paternal or maternal? If paternal, had Richard's father been buried in some country place whence the rest of the family migrated to London? All that can be said on the question is the negative observation that there are no pronounced provincial features in the language or spelling of Richard or his brother John Cely, who was a woolman and also a merchant of the Staple.<sup>14</sup>

Richard and John may have had a sister named Elizabeth. In 1480 John mentions to his nephew George Cely that

there was in time past a variance and a jar between Richard Bowell and my master your father for a duty [debt] that he should owe to my said master your father.

<sup>11</sup> Philip E. Jones, ed., *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 1458-82* (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 4-7. For a list of others of the family, and assorted unconnected Celys, see Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Michigan, 1948), p. 365.

<sup>12</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (1957).

<sup>13</sup> *C.L.* 58.

<sup>14</sup> Guildhall (London) MS. 9171/8 fo. 10v (17 Oct. 1490) is the will of a John Cely, skinner of London, but there is nothing to connect him with our family.

And it is so now by my labour I have made my sister and my master your father accorded and agreed for that matter, and a part is forgiven, and the t'other part ye and my cousin Richard your brother shall have to part between you.<sup>15</sup>

'My sister' could mean the sister of John's wife, but this seems unlikely in view of the arrangement to allow Richard and George to share the money. The probable implication is that the sister was the widow of Richard Bowell. Bowell was a stapler who had been in a partnership of sorts with Richard Cely and John Felde in 1449, when the loan was made to Henry VI, and had died in 1478. His will gives us the name of his wife, Elizabeth.<sup>16</sup>

There are two particular puzzles about the immediate family. John Stow, in his *Survey of London* (1598), describes a memorial in the Celys' parish church of St Olave, Hart Street, to 'Richard Cely and Robert Cely, fellmongers, principal builders and benefactors of this church'.<sup>17</sup> No dates are furnished. Richard Cely is presumably the father of Robert, Richard and George, who bequeathed money for making the steeple and an altar in the church, whose merchant mark was carved in two of the corbels of the nave, and whose tomb was erected by his son Richard.<sup>18</sup> But who was Robert? His impecunious son Robert? A member of the earlier generation? Or did Stow simplify a partially obliterated inscription which had included Richard's wife Agnes and son Richard, who were also buried in this tomb?<sup>19</sup>

The other 'unattached' member of the household is the William Cely who spent his short adult life as the family's faithful and deferential factor at Calais. He received no bequest in the will of Agnes Cely, who left money to John's wife and son (a student at Oxford),<sup>20</sup> nor is he ever addressed by a member of the family in terms that would suggest close relationship. He was probably a rather distant dependant, who shared, however, a godfather with Richard Cely junior. 'Cousins' of Richard and George, a term used loosely in a society where relationships within a wide network were carefully nurtured, were Thomas Blackham, fishmonger of London, Robert Coldale of Rainham, John Maynard, and the lawyer William Cottillard or Cutlerd.

<sup>15</sup> C.L. 88.

<sup>16</sup> Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 33 Wattys.

<sup>17</sup> John Stow, *The Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (Oxford, 1908), I, 132.

<sup>18</sup> The mark on two of the stone corbels is reproduced in Alfred Povah, *The Annals of the Parishes of St Olave Hart Street and Allhallows Staining in the City of London* (1894), p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Richard junior requested burial there in his will, P.C.C. 25 Dogett and Essex Record Office D/DL T1 528.

<sup>20</sup> P.C.C. 8 Logge. Her nephew, later called 'Master' John Cely, does not appear in A. B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500* (Oxford, 1957).

The two elder Cely boys may have been named after close relatives. 'George' was still an uncommon name in England, despite the fact that it belonged to her patron saint.<sup>21</sup> It was, however, favoured by the Neville family at this time, and was borne by the Duke of Clarence, younger brother of Edward IV, and given to one of the king's own children, George of Windsor. A very odd feature of letters to George Cely from his father is the sudden switch in 1479 from 'thee' on 15 April to 'you' on 30 April. I have conjectured that George had attained his majority in the interim: was he perhaps born on St George's Day, 23 April?

The date at which Richard Cely senior married has not been ascertained. His wife was Agnes, daughter of John and Lucy Andrew of Adderbury, Oxfordshire. Her elder brother, Richard Andrew, had made his way in the world along one of the other main roads which lay open to an able young man: a career in the church. He served as chancellor to Archbishop Chichele and official of the court of Canterbury, and had become a clerk in royal government employ by 1433. From 1442 to 1455 he was secretary to Henry VI. Along the way he picked up a handsome collection of benefices and offices, and was rewarded for his services by being obtruded on the chapter of York Minster as Dean of York in 1452. Possibly only the replacement of Henry by Edward IV prevented further promotion to a bishopric. Andrew did, however, have the minor distinction of becoming the first warden both of Sion College and of All Souls, Oxford.<sup>22</sup>

Although there is no direct evidence in the Cely papers that they had much to do with this rather grand relative, property deeds show that it was from him that Richard Cely senior acquired his country estate, Bretts Place, in Aveley, Essex, in July 1462, and other properties in Aveley, Rainham and Upminster.<sup>23</sup> Almost certainly it was through the same connection that he obtained his house in Mark Lane, London. Andrew himself held the Essex properties as heir of Isabel, widow of Robert Arnold, a well-to-do London grocer.<sup>24</sup> It may also be that Andrew had

<sup>21</sup> E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (3rd edn, Oxford, 1977), p. 129.

<sup>22</sup> J. Otway-Ruthven, *The King's Secretary and the Signet Office in the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1939), pp. 172–3; J. Raine, ed., *Testamenta Eboracensia*, III (Surtees Soc. XLV, 1865), pp. 232–7.

<sup>23</sup> E.R.O. D/DL T1 441, 442. At his death in 1477 Andrew bequeathed Richard Cely senior all the bed-hangings and utensils that he had left at Bretts Place, except the best feather bed, best brass pot and 2 muslin pillows, which were to go to Henry Fyfeld. His younger sister Agnes had a pair of sheets of 'Reyneze' cloth.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew is described as Isabel's 'cousin and heir' in D/DL T1 441, but the properties bequeathed her by her husband were all sold after her death in accordance with his will: D/DL T1 420. Robert Arnold (sheriff of London in 1426) was granted Bretts

taken an interest in the education of his nephew Richard. In 1481 Richard paid visits to 'mine old acquaintance' in Leicester, where Andrew became Dean of Newarke College in 1450, and in York, where Andrew had lived as a residentiary canon for at least eighteen years.<sup>25</sup> This is hardly conclusive. But two slightly more substantial pieces of evidence suggest that Richard might have been singled out in his youth to spend some time in the north in his uncle's household. These are Richard's handwriting, which is more formal and bookish than the hands of his brothers and other merchants of the time, and the surprising existence of some northern linguistic traits in his letters, features that are entirely absent from the writings of other members of the family. For example, in his earlier letters he often uses *qw-* or *qwh-* for *wh-*, as in *qwher* or *qwerfor* 'where', 'wherefore', or *qwhych* 'which', and *at* (a Scandinavian form in origin) for the familiar southern English *that*.

William Maryon, member of the London Grocers' Company, merchant of the Staple, and fellow parishioner of the Celys, was an intimate and self-effacing friend of the whole family. He had property in Watford, and may have been a relation of the Richard Maryon, glover of Watford, who appears in documents of 1455–67.<sup>26</sup> William mentioned no house in London in his will of 1493,<sup>27</sup> and his close involvement with the Celys almost suggests that he spent much of his time in their household. His relations with the family went a long way back: he had stood godfather to Richard Cely junior (and also to William Cely, the apprentice and factor). Later he was godfather to Richard's youngest daughter. Any wife and children that Maryon may have had of his own predeceased him. His nephew, no doubt a sister's son, was Robert Eyrk or Herrick, girdler, a godson of George Cely. The Eyrks, Erykes or Herricks were another family from Wigston, Leicestershire.<sup>28</sup> Robert's brother John was also a citizen of London and a skinner, but John's will of 1494 left money to a third brother, William, who was still living in Wigston with his children. A married sister had moved to Coventry.<sup>29</sup> To complete the

in 1410 (D/DL T1 316) and Andrew had obtained it by March 1454. Robert and Isabel Arnold enfeoffed the tenement in Mark Lane in May 1424: Hustings Roll 153 (6).

<sup>25</sup> *C.L.* 117. But 'Alison Michael' of York was an acquaintance of both George and Richard. Alison was given one of Agnes Cely's gowns when she visited London with her husband, Michael Koke, in 1482: *C.L.* 165. For Andrew's residence see Barrie Dobson, 'The Residentiary Canons of York in the Fifteenth Century', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xxx (1979), 145–74.

<sup>26</sup> *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1454–61*, 50, *C.C.R.*, 1461–8, 210, 442.

<sup>27</sup> P.C.C. 19 Vox.

<sup>28</sup> Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant*, passim. The name appears in the earliest records, from c. 1250.

<sup>29</sup> P.C.C. 14 Vox. There was another brother, Richard, 'upholder' of London: *C.L.* 154; R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Books Preserved among the Archives of the Corporation of the City of London at the Guildhall: Letter-Book L* (1912), pp. 150, 182, 304.

circle of Cely–Maryon–Eyryk connections, Agnes Cely, mother of Richard and George, was godmother of Agnes Eyryk, daughter of that Robert Eyryk who was George’s godson and Maryon’s nephew. Such ties were no matter of mere ecclesiastical convention, but entailed recognized social obligations between godparent and child, and also cemented relations between godparent and natural parents. Parents-in-god took on a spiritual relationship and could not intermarry. Equally, the system could be used to extend the network of family connections, and it would be interesting to know what other godparents had been chosen for the Cely boys.

While it is uncertain what contact the Celys had with Dean Richard Andrew in the 1470s, their letters contain plenty of references to their immediate patron, Sir John Weston, who became prior of the English branch of the semi-military Order of St John of Jerusalem in 1476, at the age of forty-five.<sup>30</sup> As prior, Sir John ranked as the premier baron of England and had a more or less automatic place in the king’s Council. He was especially the friend and ‘good lord’ of Richard junior, who often stayed in Sir John’s household in the Order’s London priory at Clerkenwell, or on various of their country estates. The Knights of St John had much property in Essex, including the area about the Celys’ country house at Aveley. At other times Richard stayed at Temple Balsall, Warwicks., at the preceptory at Melchbourne, Beds., or at Sutton.<sup>31</sup> When, in 1479, he had been at Sutton from 10 April to 22 May, Richard complained rather boastfully that he ‘could not get from my lord of St John’s, not past three days together’.<sup>32</sup> In 1480 Sir John took Richard with him when he was an ambassador to the court of France, and shortly before that Richard accompanied him to Gravesend in a formal party of welcome to the king’s sister, Margaret, Dowager Duchess of Burgundy, who was visiting England on diplomatic business.

A more practical favour was the protection extended by Sir John, which proved valuable when Richard and George were accused of poaching in the royal forest of Essex. Their position as appreciative ‘clients’ of Sir John was symbolized by the wearing of gowns of his livery, and the title ‘my lord’ invariably used to and of him by all the family. In return for his patronage, George executed commissions at the marts in Brabant for Sir John and members of his entourage, buying such

<sup>30</sup> *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters 1484–1499* (1960), p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Balsall had become a personal holding of the prior in 1476: David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales* (2nd edn, 1971), p. 301. ‘Sutton’ is presumably Sutton-at-Hone, Kent, but the order had another estate named Sutton in Essex.

<sup>32</sup> *C.L.* 55.

things as saddles and spurs, furs or hose-cloth. Richard Cely senior was happy to lend Sir John money when he made a visit to Rhodes in 1481-2, and anxiously reminded George, in June 1480, to send Sir John any news that was current at Calais:

I think ye might write much more nor ye do, for my lord of St Johns send to me for tiding every week. For the which my lord take it for a great pleasure for to have such tiding as ye hear in [those] parts. For the which ye may no less do but write much the more of tiding, for my lord's sake. For in good faith, he is a courteous lord to me and to you and Richard Cely.<sup>33</sup>

At Calais, where 'one heard from all the world',<sup>34</sup> George was not only in touch with events in France and the low countries, but could be expected to glean news from still further afield. And if not at Calais, then at Bruges, where the Venetian and Florentine merchants would be sure to have tidings about the situation of Rhodes in 1481.<sup>35</sup>

While Sir John was abroad George sent him details of the current expedition against Scotland in 1482, and any other news, some of it a little stale:

Right worshipful sir and mine essingular good lord, after all due recommendation pretending, I recommend me unto your good lordship in the most lowliest wise that I can.

Furthermore, pleaseth it your lordship to understand that I have received an letter from your lordship, bearing date at Naples the last day of November [1481]... We understand, my lord, by your said letter of your royal receiving at Naples, and of your great presents, which was to us glad tidings and great rejoicing to hear of, etc.

Pleaseth it your lordship to understand that the Duke of Albany is comen into England, and he is sworn to the king's good grace. And the king has sent him into Scotland with 60,000 men in three battles [battalions], and many lords of England with him, Jesu be his good speed. Within an month there has been with[in] 44 towns and villages burnt in Scotland, and many lords taken and slain. Dumfries is burnt. Also, my lord the king's eldest daughter save one [i.e. the princess Mary] is dead now late. The young Duchess of Burgundy is dead, and that land is in great rumour. Of other tidings I can none write.<sup>36</sup>

This was only a draft copy; a conclusion to match the honorific opening would have been added.

Unhappily, all but one of Sir John's letters describing his voyage have disappeared. It may, however, have been Sir John who conveyed some very hot news about disturbing events and rumours in June 1483, as the

<sup>33</sup> *C.L.* 90.

<sup>34</sup> Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 1 (Oxford, 1971), p. 494.

<sup>35</sup> *C.L.* 114.

<sup>36</sup> *C.L.* 178.

Duke of Gloucester made his moves to capture his nephew's throne.<sup>37</sup> A few curious markings, both in George's letter just quoted and in the note concerning the happenings in 1483, suggest that in their exchange of information the two were in the habit of replacing certain key words or phrases by ciphers. But George was a dilatory correspondent. In early 1488, when Sir John was kept in Calais by the fear of pirates, and sent a message by William Cely regretting this because he 'longed sore' to see Richard and George in London, he also said tactfully that

he marvel that ye write him no letters. He saith [he] had no word from your masterships since he departed out of England, wherefore he feareth him ye should take some displeasure with him or with some of his.<sup>38</sup>

Such courtesies of intercourse were carefully kept on both sides. Sir John addresses George as 'worshipful cousin' and commends himself 'to my father and yours, and your mother'.<sup>39</sup> Describing Richard senior as 'my father' was a matter of politeness to an older man. There may have been some relationship, but 'cousin' in this case was probably also a mere courtly form of address. 'Worshipful' (once abbreviated by John Cely to 'wursall')<sup>40</sup> was, on the other hand, a standard appellation for a merchant. Even Sir Ralph Hastings, brother of William, Lord Hastings, one-time Captain of Calais and Lord Chamberlain, may address George as 'right worshipful sir'. Otherwise he starts a letter, 'my full trusty friend', and signs 'your true loving Rauff Hastings'.<sup>41</sup> Robert Radcliffe, gentleman porter of Calais, who gave himself airs and signed 'le filz Sir John Radclyff, Robert', opens merely with 'brother George', addressing him as a fellow stapler. The address on the outside is 'to my right trusty brother George Cely, merchant of the Staple'.<sup>42</sup> 'Trusty' tended to mean that the writer wanted the recipient to do something for him.

There is a clear distinction between the opening of Richard senior's letters to his sons – almost invariably 'I greet you' (or earlier, 'thee') 'well, and...' – and George's opening to his father, 'right reverend and worshipful father'. George is addressed by his godson, Robert Eyryk, 'right reverend and worshipful sir', and the servant Joyce Parmenter begins 'right worshipful master'. But William Maryon, an older man, writes similarly to George, 'right reverend sir and my special good friend', or 'right worshipful and reverend sir', and George's wife Margery uses a similar form. To an important personage, epistolary openings might be much more flowery: 'Honourable and worshipful sir,

<sup>37</sup> *C.L.* 200.

<sup>39</sup> *C.L.* 129.

<sup>41</sup> *C.L.* 232, 245.

<sup>42</sup> *C.L.* 42, and similarly ('Brother George Sely') 65.

<sup>38</sup> *C.L.* 240.

<sup>40</sup> *C.L.* 88.

after all humble and due reverence had as appertaineth...'.<sup>43</sup> But in short notes to friends and servants or apprentices there was much less formality: 'brother Cely' or 'brother George' from other staplers, 'well-beloved, I greet you well' (Richard junior to the servant Joyce), 'William Cely, we greet you well, and...', 'Hugh, I pray you...'.<sup>44</sup>

While 'sir' was used of a knight or a priest, it had no specially deferential connotations in ordinary employment. William Cely uses it to his masters Richard and George, but Richard uses it to his younger brother George. Staplers call each other 'sir', as well as the 'brother' which indicated membership in the same Company, or 'fellow George'. Roland Thornburgh of the Order of St John addresses Richard junior simply as 'bedfellow'.<sup>44</sup> 'Master', however, indicated a certain status. In drawing up bills for her lodgers at Calais, Agnes Burnell distinguished between 'master Cely', which apparently meant Richard senior, and 'Richard Cely' and 'George Cely'.<sup>45</sup> George's infant son was 'master Richard' to the factor Nicholas Best.<sup>46</sup>

In writing, at least, Christian names seldom appear on their own, except when applied to children and servants. Even when the abbreviation 'Will' is used, it is accompanied by the surname ('Will Cely', 'Will Maryon') in the letters. And in George's personal memoranda, he always refers to 'my brother Richard', not 'Richard'. William Cely writes of 'John Dalton' but of 'Joyce', and of 'Margery', the woman of the cookshop in Calais who had children by George. Male servants are 'Hankin', 'Harry my boy', or given their surname only, as 'Kay' (John Kay), 'Luntley' or 'Sperying'. Maidservants are 'Alison', 'Margaret', 'Joan', and Richard had a shameful encounter with 'Em'.<sup>47</sup> George, however, calls a higher-class mistress 'my lady Clare', presumably another example, like 'reverend' and 'worshipful', of a supposedly honorific title used more generally.<sup>48</sup> Robert Coldale wrote of his wife as 'my dame',<sup>49</sup> and husbands might use 'dame', 'wife' or 'spouse' in speaking to their wives. Women probably said 'sir', 'husband', or 'spouse'. Endearments seem to have become common form rather later, during the sixteenth century.

Servants like Joyce Parmenter were addressed strictly as 'ye' not 'thou', and 'ye' was also used between husband and wife, or parents and adult children. Richard senior's change from 'thee' to 'you' in his opening greeting to George therefore marks a very definite alteration.

<sup>43</sup> *C.L.* 16.

<sup>45</sup> File 16 fos. 11-16.

<sup>47</sup> *C.L.* 169 and below, Ch. 10, p. 269.

<sup>48</sup> For Clare see Ch. 2, pp. 49-50.

<sup>44</sup> *C.L.* 123.

<sup>46</sup> File 16 fo. 36.

<sup>49</sup> *C.L.* 60.

Between adults, 'thee' and 'thou' were instantly recognized as insulting in intent. One priest bitterly offended another in 1491 by saying to him, 'Avaunt, churl!' and 'I would prove thee a churl of condition' (that is, a bondman by birth), while two Buckinghamshire ladies also used the familiar pronoun in an exchange of 'thou art a strong whore!'.<sup>50</sup> There is a well-known example of a trade of insults in the Paston letters, displayed in both syntax and gesture when the family chaplain failed to doff his hat to the son of the house, and the dialogue went, 'Cover thy head?' 'So shall I, for thee!' 'Shalt thou so, knave?'<sup>51</sup>

An educated person in the fifteenth century was taught how to write letters in proper form, with introductory greeting, good wishes for the health and well-being of the correspondent, and perhaps deprecatory reference to one's own, followed by news to be conveyed and the main purpose of the letter, all finished with a polite and pious conclusion. The same phraseology, with minor variations to individual choice, can be found in all the collections of contemporary letters. Possibly specimens circulated, just as examples of more formal documents, such as letters of payment, of attorney, or of protection to confer immunity from creditors, were copied and passed round, to be printed in due course in a compilation like Richard Arnold's collection of material issued in 1502.<sup>52</sup> Epistolary formulae persisted well into the next century, but correspondents of the Celys' class gradually became more skilful in the use of the written language, experimented more freely, expressed themselves more easily, and drew more readily on richer resources of vocabulary.

Formal politeness to one's elders and superiors was inculcated by precept and ceremonial, and as a rule it was duly observed. This does not mean that any unnatural degree of respect coloured private attitudes. George Cely probably toned down one letter which conveyed criticism of his father before he actually sent it. His final phrase in his uncompleted draft, 'in the reverence of God see better to the packing of your wool that shall come', probably struck him as much too disrespectful.<sup>53</sup> Possibly, too, he remembered his brother Richard's plea a month or so before, in begging George to write home more frequently and so avoid family upsets: in the interest of averting 'discomforts', 'let us endeavour

<sup>50</sup> E. M. Elvey, ed., *The Courts of the Archdeaconry of Buckinghamshire, 1483-1523* (Bucks. Record Soc. XIX, 1975), nos. 148, 296.

<sup>51</sup> *Paston L.*, I, no. 129.

<sup>52</sup> Published at Antwerp as *The Names of the Baylifs Custos Mairs and Sherefs of the Cite of London...wyth odur dyvers maters good and necessary for euery citezen to vnderstond and knowe*. An edition by F. Douce was pub. in 1811 under the title of *The Customs of London, otherwise called Arnold's Chronicle*. Cited henceforth as Richard Arnold.

<sup>53</sup> *C.L.* 93.

us to please'.<sup>54</sup> 'Ye know [our father's] condition of old', said Richard when a row was occasioned about the number of horses which George kept at Calais, as tactlessly, or maliciously, reported to old Richard at a time when he was already 'pensive and heavy'.<sup>55</sup> Both parents were agitated by the prospect of war with France, with its attendant risk to George, and his brother warned that if by some disaster George engaged in the fighting and was taken prisoner or killed, it would spell immediate death to father and mother. 'We must tender their age, and have an eye to our own weal.' George had had a chance to give Richard advice on the proper management of a father in September 1476, again with self-interest mingled in his part-kindly, part-patronizing attitude to the old man:

Brother, our father is now at Calais, and is worshipful, and so taken. And for our honesties let us see that all thing about him be honest and cleanly [i.e. dignified and fitting]. He is not now at Aveley, and the more worshipful as he is at Calais, the better beloved shall we be, and the more set by these acts [by] the world. Brother, I understand he hath no mo to wait upon him but you. Do your duty, and at my coming to Calais I shall do mine. I think every hour three till [I] come to Calais: I hope to be with you shortly. I pray recommend me to our father.<sup>56</sup>

Plenty of young people have been nervous of exposing their parents to the criticism of their peer-group. Although 'cleanly' had little of its modern meaning, George does seem to imply that by this time of his life their father was happiest when leading a relaxed existence in the obscurity of the country, and that care must be taken lest he lower their prestige at Calais. Did the brothers always treat him with proper 'worship' in the privacy of their own home?

Perhaps it is over-subtle to see some element of parody of his father's tedious instructions in George's very dutiful and detailed rehearsal of how he dealt with a routine shipment of fells, probably in April of the previous year.<sup>57</sup> He carefully does all the arithmetic and informs his father (what the latter surely knew already) how many fells made the equivalent of a sarpler of fleece-wool. It is very likely that George had been scolded for failing to send proper reports on his business activities. Their father was certainly ready to upbraid his sons, especially for their slackness in writing home, and he had no great opinion of their business acumen or application. But he reveals great affection and solicitude for George at a time when George was ill in Bruges, promising to meet all necessary costs of doctors and diet, and begging George not to over-exert

<sup>54</sup> *C.L.* 84.

<sup>56</sup> *C.L.* 4.

<sup>55</sup> *C.L.* 111 and Ch. 3, pp. 69-70.

<sup>57</sup> *C.L.* 247.