Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe

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PART I

Peasant Women’s Work in the Context of Marriage

Since the bulk of the population of late medieval and early modern Europe were peasants living in rural areas, it is fitting to begin an investigation of women in the traditional society of the preindustrial period with the peasantry. It was the division of labor and patterns of work learned on the land and in the villages that peasants carried with them when they moved to urban centers seeking wages for their labor. The familial roles established in the country readily transferred to towns. For most women, these traditional roles would mean that the context of their work would center on their obligations to family, either their natal family or their family by marriage. The vast majority of women would marry, although the proportion remaining single in the urban environment was slightly higher than in rural areas.

In peasant society the woman’s sphere and place were the house, close, and village; the man’s were the fields, roads, and forests. The peasant woman rose at dawn and began her workday by starting a fire to warm the dwelling and cook a breakfast. A woman’s daily round of work comprised the routine of housework, including laundry, cooking, brewing, and rudimentary housecleaning. In addition, she fed the farm animals such as chickens, geese, cows, and pigs. The kitchen garden and fruit trees in the close were her concern as well. Her daily chores took her to the village well, to an ale-wife’s house and a bakery, to church, and perhaps to a tavern for a good gossip with other village women. Only seasonally did her work take her to the fields. When weeding needed to be done, a plow ox goaded, and harvests gotten in, her labor was necessary in the fields.

One of her major contributions, however, would be producing and training the new work force, her children. A girl learned the female tasks at her mother’s knee from the moment she began to crawl, and under her mother’s tutelage she eventually learned the more skilled work of the housewife, including brewing. Child rearing she readily learned as she took care of younger siblings or babysat for other village children. The learning process was centered on her mother and her natal home.
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It would be a mistake, however, to equate these medieval rural women with pioneers or farm wives. The peasant economy was not a self-contained, family economy but rather one that relied upon purchasing a number of goods and services either from fellow villagers or from towns. While women, for instance, carried their spindles with them through most of the day so that their hands would not be idle in a free moment, they did not usually turn the thread that they produced into cloth for family consumption and they did not make the family clothing. The money that they could make selling their thread went to purchase goods and services for their family.

Women had a variety of supplemental economic activities that contributed to the home economy, but the most apparent one in reading village records was brewing, the subject of Judith Bennett's essay. Because ale was a staple of diet and because it did not keep well, it had to be produced frequently or some people had to supply it on a commercial basis. The ale-wife became a common village figure, although not in every village, for in some men dominated brewing.

The ale-wife's career demonstrates the way in which women fit their supplemental economic ventures into their life cycle. Only married women brewed and they did so periodically. The inconsistency of their brewing careers indicates much about women's work patterns in general; they embarked on extra work when time allowed or when family need dictated that they add further work to their daily routine.

The separate spheres of women's and men's work and the accommodation of women's contributions to family needs illustrate the basic characteristic of medieval marriages. From an economic standpoint, they were partnerships. With the contracting of the marriage, when the woman bought the dowry for establishing a household and the husband assured his wife of a dower, the basic economic unit was formed. Although the division of labor by sex was fairly rigid, it maximized the economic contributions of both partners. The work of each was equally important, but one suspects that the husband usually had the ultimate authority over the distribution of common profits. At least, only men had regular access to village courts and offices.