Peasant Women's Contribution to the Home Economy in Late Medieval England

A woman's work is never done, we say, and yet we do not know what work rural women did in the late Middle Ages. The hours must have been very long and the work hard, for the only literary piece that speaks of the peasant woman's day with envy is that old saw of the tyrannical husband who taunts his wife into changing places for a day because he thinks her work is easier. He, of course, learns his lesson.¹ Since the basic unit of economic production and consumption was the peasant household, a woman's contribution normally was made within the context of her family. Contrary to the opinion of some historians of the early modern family, medieval English families were not normally extended with many female kin to lend a hand.² A household consisting of parents, children, and sometimes another kinsperson or servant relied heavily on the housewife's contribution to the home economy. But what was the nature of a wife's contribution? The tyrannical husband of the ballad argues: "And sene the good that we have is halfe dele thyn, / Thow shalt laber for thy part as I doo for myne." Two areas are traditionally assigned to the wife: the daily running of the household and the raising and training of the next generation. But there were a variety of other activities, including the classical occupation of spinning, that were supplemental to the routine management of the house and family and brought in extra earnings.

The problem for historians has been to find evidence on how married couples divided the economic responsibilities of the household. Men's share emerges more quickly because men frequently appeared in the manorial court rolls in cases related to their work and landholding or in the account rolls where their wages were recorded. Women’s work was more often directed toward the private household economy than toward the
public one of the manor. One might take the excellent studies that have been done of early modern and modern peasant women and cast their picture back into earlier centuries, but the early modern economy was different in many ways from the medieval one. Women in early modern Europe had many more opportunities to engage in cottage industry or to sell their labor in the rapidly expanding cities. The economy of the thirteenth through mid-fifteenth centuries in England was still largely centered on the exploitation of individual holdings on manors. Manorial records do contribute something to our knowledge of women’s work. More information can be gleaned from wills, poll tax returns, and coroners’ inquests. These last provide a vignette of people’s activities in the last few hours of their lives before they died a sudden death by homicide or accident. They are rich in details about the daily routine of peasants and give the reader a sense of being at the scene.

Most rural women would eventually marry, because they had so few options for employment outside the household economy. Peasant women would not become nuns, and the position of servant was usually a temporary one limited to the teenage years of the life cycle. The other possibilities for unmarried peasant girls were not entirely attractive. They could stay at a brother’s home and work for his family; they could hope to find work in an urban center or on a manor as a servant; or they could become prostitutes. J. C. Russell’s work on the 1377 poll tax showed that in villages with a population of 1 to 800, 75 percent of the women were married. This percentage tended to decrease in boroughs. The figure represents all women over fourteen years of age (the taxable age) but does not indicate widows or those who would eventually be married. Determining the number of men and women who remained single is particularly difficult, even with demographic models. Wrigley and Schofield, however, estimated that only about 7 percent of the population in the mid-sixteenth century never married. Thus the number of permanently celibate woman was very low.

A woman’s first contribution to the household economy, therefore, was the money, goods, animals, or land that she brought to the marriage in her dowry, dower from a former husband, or inheritance in her own right. These possessions came from a variety of sources, but wills give the most detailed information. One must remember, however, that they are a biased source since they tend to overrepresent the wealthier elements in the community. The vast majority of wills were left by men so that women appear as beneficiaries of husbands, fathers, grandfathers, godfathers, and masters.

A father dying without a son could provide in his will for his daughter or daughters to inherit his property. In the customary law of most manors and in common law, the inheritance would be divided equally among the surviving daughters. The will gave a man of property an opportunity to divide
the inheritance himself so that he could favor one daughter, usually the eldest, and keep the family lands intact. Of the 319 married men leaving wills in Bedfordshire in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, 44 of them, or 14 percent, had only daughters as heirs.⁶ Sometimes the daughter was already married and the will makes clear that the son-in-law would have control over the land, but the right to the land remained to the issue of the marriage. Heiresses of property would have been much sought after in marriage, and the father of an adult heiress would have carefully selected a congenial adult son-in-law. After all, the father might have to retire and live with them. Other fathers died young and left the lands in care of their widows until the daughters were of marriageable age.

Even if the daughter was not the chief heir, she could claim some part of the family wealth, usually payable in animals, grain, household goods, or money. These inheritances might have been in addition to an earlier dowry or they might be a provision for a future one. Only 9 percent of the wills specifically mention that the bequest to a woman was for her marriage. Henry Davy, a prosperous man, died with two daughters still unmarried. He left them both considerable grants of land, which they were to receive on their marriage.⁷ Monetary bequests for dowries ranged from 13s. 4d. to £40. John Derlynge, who left his daughter 20s., was fairly typical of the humbler will makers.⁸ Other relatives might also contribute toward a girl’s marriage. An uncle on the father’s side was the usual source, but one grandfather generously gave each of his granddaughters £10 toward her marriage. In the poem “How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter,” the mother meets her obligation to her daughter’s dowry by collecting goods for her as soon as she is born.⁹

The dying men also raised the issue of their wives’ remarriage and made provision for them accordingly. Of the 319 married men leaving wills, 85 percent were survived by widows. Common law allowed a widow a third of the husband’s property for life and would permit her to take this land into a new marriage.¹⁰ Wills, however, permitted husbands greater flexibility, and most chose the more generous provisions of customary law that gave the wife life interest in the tenement or control until the son reached the age of majority. Some other dower would be settled on her when she relinquished the land to their heir. The husband might stipulate that the dower was hers only if she did not remarry. Other husbands left their widows clear title to some property that they could take with them if they married, but they could not take the family land. Thus, John Heywood provided his widow with £20, a number of animals, grain, and the household goods she had brought with her as dowry. These were to be given her “wit owt eny grugge . . . of my children.”¹¹

The women of whom we have been speaking received sufficient property
from fathers, husbands, or other kin to make them sought-after marriage partners. Society did not dictate a specific value for the dowry in order to marry; that was a matter of individual negotiations. But if family could not provide, how could a single woman hope to accumulate a dowry or supplement a meager one?

Servants received bequests from dying masters or mistresses in addition to wages. The typical bequests included items of clothing, sheep, a small sum of money, or malt. Occasionally, a favored servant would inherit a substantial bequest; Elizabeth Lamkyn was given 26s. 8d. "to her profeccion." Since servants were often the social equals of the masters, some of these gifts may have been part of a social network of village mutual support. Thus servants were rather like godchildren and received similar types of gifts in wills.

Female servants also converted wages into bits of land of an acre or two that they could add to their dowry, as the entrance fines they paid in manorial court indicate. In the tight land market of pre-plague England, even a woman with only an acre or two of land would be an attractive marriage partner. The living that such a small dowry could provide was not much and would probably be matched by a groom with equally meager resources, but five acres could support a couple in good years. Undoubtedly some young people even married without the cushion of land or savings and would have to rely on their labor for survival. One such couple appeared with a small band of petty thieves who were trying to flog a pelt in Bedfordshire. They apparently met on the road, for he was from Berwick-upon-Tweed and she was from Stratford, outside London.

Young women who worked for their dowries did not necessarily turn to their fathers to find them a husband on whom to bestow it. Thus these wage-earning women were making their own decisions about marriage independent from their families. Judith Bennett has shown that, of the 426 mercet payments appearing in the Ramsey Abbey Liber Gersumarum, 141 of the brides, or one-third, paid their own marriage fines. Furthermore, when they did pay for themselves, they usually paid less, probably because there was less property involved. They bought general licenses to marry whom they pleased more frequently than those whose father or bridegroom paid the marriage fine. Bennett suggests that the reason for this greater freedom was that these women were not part of their family's strategy for economic and social success in the village.

The dowry having been contributed to the new household, the bride settled into her other roles of providing her labor, reproductive capacity, and child rearing to the economy. The literature and folklore of the Middle Ages are decisive in dividing the men's sphere from the women's, both in physical environment and in types of work. We all learn John Ball's revolu-
tionary jingle on class consciousness: "When Adam delved and Eve span / Where then were all the gentlemen." It is instructive that Ball found nothing wrong with the sexual division of labor, but noted only that in the beginning there were not class distinctions. Men and women were also distinguished by the symbols of their particular spheres of work, and these are common identifying characteristics in art and literature. The poem "The False Fox" provides a classic example:

The good-wyfe came out in her smok,  
And at the fox she threw hir rok [spindle].  
The good-man came out with his flayle,  
And smote the fox upon the tayle.17

The accidental death patterns in the coroners' inquests and manorial court evidence confirm the sex-specific division of labor in rural England. Women's work and general round of daily activities were much less physically dangerous than men's; women constituted only 22 percent of the 2022 adults (over the age of fourteen) in the accidental death cases in the coroners' inquests. Compared with the men, women spent much more of their workday around the house and village: 21.2 percent of the women compared with 8.3 percent of the men died of accidents in their houses or closes. They also spent more time visiting and working with their neighbors: 5.8 percent of the women's accidents were in a neighbor's home or close compared with 3.8 of the men. When women did venture from home, it was often in connection with their domestic duties. Thus 5.9 percent of the women drowned in a public well compared with 1.6 of the men, and 9.7 percent of the women died in a village ditch or pond compared with 4.9 percent of the men. Men were much more likely than women to die in fields, forests, mills, construction sites, and marl pits. The place of death, therefore, confirms women's chief work sphere as the home and men's as the fields and forests.

Time was given very roughly in the inquests, but there was a definite pattern of greater and lesser risks for men and women as they pursued their daily routines. Both rose at dawn, but women had only 4.2 percent of their accidents then compared with men, who had 9.8. The morning work was more risky for women, with 15.6 percent of their accidents occurring at that time compared with 9.8 percent of the men's. Noon was high for both, probably as they tired of their labor and became hungry: 20.8 percent for women and 17.7 percent for men. Women might have had a slightly higher number of accidents because they were involved with cooking at noon. Afternoon for both sexes represented a lull (4.2 and 7.5 respectively), and may even indicate a postprandial nap. But evening saw another increase
(15.6 and 18.9 respectively). Night was the real killer for both at 39.6 percent for women and 33.9 percent for men.

When one looks at the causes of women’s accidental deaths and the places they occurred at these hours, the round of daily work becomes apparent. The morning, noon, and some evening deaths were connected with fetching water from wells for washing and preparing meals. Working with large animals and brewing also took place in the morning and at noon. The afternoon deaths were from laundry or field work in season. The high number of deaths at night resulted from dangers in the home, usually house fires or walls falling on unsuspecting sleepers, or from wandering about at night in the pitch black without candles. There were many bodies of water and pits and wells that one could fall into after nightfall and drowned.

The seasonal pattern of women’s and men’s deaths were closer. Women had a significantly higher percentage of accidents in May (12.9 percent compared with 7.7 percent for men), but there is no ready explanation for this difference. The cause of death indicates that women were more prone to falls and drowning during May, but their work does not seem to be particularly seasonal. It is possible that more women were pregnant or recovering from pregnancy. Wrigley and Schofield’s sixteenth-century data, however, indicate that February and March were the highest months for births. The two high months for men’s accidents, June and August, can be readily explained by harvest and other heavy field work.

The division of labor by sex was set early in a child’s life. By the age of two and three the accidental death patterns of children reflected that of their respective parents. Among the little girls, 27 percent of their deaths involved accidents while playing in the house with pots and cauldrons; these objects accounted for only 14 percent of the little boys’ deaths. Accidents that occurred outside the home accounted for 64 percent of the boys’ and only 44 percent of the girls’ deaths.

Women’s work in peasant households has been largely misrepresented by modern historians who tend to equate peasant women with pioneer women. Medieval peasant women did not spend much of their time producing from scratch the basic necessities for their families. Medieval society had very specialized service occupations, even at the village level, and most households availed themselves of specialists in weaving, tailoring, and even brewing and baking. One has only to think of the many occupational surnames such as tailor, baker, cook, and weaver to appreciate the medieval roots of service trades. A second misconception that must not be allowed to stand is Boserup’s suggestion that peasant women’s work involved fewer hours than men’s or that, because women had fewer accidents, their work was not as strenuous. Such a view overlooks the dual nature of women’s economic contribution. One side was the maintenance
Peasant Women's Contribution to the Home Economy

of the household and rearing of children, the other was the supplemental economic activities that brought profits in addition to those gained through agriculture.  

Women's daily household routines are very well summed up in the "Ballad of the Tyrannical Husband." The goodwife of the poem had no servant and only small children, so that her day was a full one. She complained that her nights were not restful because she had to rise and nurse the babe in arms. She then milked the cows and took them to pasture and made butter and cheese while she watched the children and dried their tears. Next she fed the poultry and took the geese to the green. She baked and brewed every fortnight and worked on carding, spinning, and beating flax. She tells her husband that, through her economy of weaving a bit of linsey woolsey during the year for the family cloths, they were able to save money and not buy cloth from the market. Her husband insists that all this work is very easy and that she really spends her day with the neighbors gossiping. But she retorts:

Soo I loke to our good withowt and withyn,
That there be none away noder mor nor myn,
Glade to pleas yow to pay, lest any bate begyn,
And for to chid thus with me, i-feyth yow be in synne.  

The housewife's first task in the morning was lighting the fire. She had to go into the close to get kindling or straw to light the embers and get the wood started. One woman, we are told in a coroners' inquest, went out early in the morning to get kindling and climbed onto a tree leaning over the common way and fell. A housewife who was over seventy went to her straw stack to get straw to start a fire, as she had for many years, but fell from her ladder on this occasion.  When the fire was started, the housewife heated the morning porridge and other food for breakfast.

Cleaning house would occupy very little of a woman's time. The houses were usually one story and had two or three rooms. Furniture was rudimentary. There would be a trestle table that was taken down at night to make room for sleeping on the floor. The household might have beds or only straw pallets on the floor. There were benches, but few chairs, and a chest or two for storage. The floors were covered with straw, and chickens, pigs, cats, and dogs wandered in and out at will. The peasants owned few pans and dishes. Wooden and clay implements were used when possible and a brass pot or pan or an iron trivet was a considerable investment. But the sparsity of furnishings and the straw on the floor should not lead one to conclude that the housewives were slovenly and cared nothing
about cleanliness. Archaeological evidence has shown that the floors were swept frequently enough that the brooms left u-shaped depressions on the floors. But the standards for a well-kept house were hardly the same as ours, provided as we are with a multitude of “time-saving” products to keep our houses spotless, so that housecleaning was not a major consumer of women’s work time.

Of the 237 women whose activity at the time of death is specified, 37 percent were doing work around the house. The most dangerous task was drawing water from wells and pits (17 percent of accidental deaths). The water was for cooking, washing, and drinking. Either the housewife or the children got water for the household. Doing the laundry was also a dangerous activity, with 3 percent of the women either drowning or being scalded. The earth around wells, ponds, and ditches became treacherously slippery so that it was easy to fall in. Thus one woman sitting by a ditch washing linen cloth in December 1348 slid into the water and drowned. Other activities resulting in accidents included cutting wood, baking, cooking, taking grain to the mill, and general housework.23

Women’s routine work for the household also included agricultural work. Women had the chief care of the domestic animals other than the plow oxen or horses. The work included feeding the animals, milking cows, and helping at calving time. They also kept the poultry: geese, hens, and maybe doves. The pig was in their charge, as was the garden in the close that produced vegetables and fruits. When their help was needed in the fields, they hoed, weeded, turned hay, tied sheaves, and even reaped. They gleaned when the harvest was over, a back-breaking task. One old woman was so tired after her day’s gleaning that she fell asleep among her sheaves and failed to put her candle out. She died in the ensuing blaze.24

We tend to make our economic boundaries too rigid and assume that in a peasant economy people will not hunt and gather. But women picked nuts, wild fruits, herbs, and greens from the woods and roadways. If they lived near the shore they also gathered shellfish. Women also gathered firewood and occasionally dug for peat. One woman, over forty years of age, went to cut turves for the family fire and was killed when a piece fell on her.25

One of the most significant contributions a wife could make to the household economy was the production and training of children. Children were an asset in the peasant economy. By the age of seven they could already be a help to the housewife, taking geese to the green, collecting eggs, picking fruits and vegetables, fishing, babysitting, and going to the well for water. When they were older they took over more of their parents’ work load. The early years were difficult, however, as the woman in the ballad of the tyrannical husband points out. During that time the housewife added the burden of caring for young children to her other chores. But the
production and training of the new work force were essential for a successful peasant household; otherwise, one had to hire servants.  

Women could also diversify their labor to bring more cash into the family. In addition to the usual egg, butter, and cheese production, some women engaged in fairly large-scale beer and bread making. Both these occupations required investment in large vessels or ovens. Britton found that in Broughton the wealthier peasant families tended to be the chief producers of beer on a large scale. Bennett has covered the matter fully in an essay in this book and so it need not detain us here. Brewing was an arduous and rather dangerous activity since it involved carrying 12-gallon vats of hot liquid and heating large tubs of water.

About nones on 2 October 1270 Amice daughter of Robert Belamy of Staploe and Sibyl Bonchevaler were carrying a tub full of grout between them in the brewhouse of Lady Juliana de Bauchamp in the hamlet of Staploe in Eaton Socon, intending to empty it into a broiling leaden vat, when Amice slipped and fell into the vat and the tub on top of her.

Five percent of the women in the coroners' inquests lost their lives in brewing accidents.

Spinning was the traditional supplemental economic activity for women. The spindle could be taken anywhere to occupy idle minutes. The women may or may not have turned the thread into cloth. Most likely, they sold it to a weaver unless they were making rough material for daily wear and sheets.

Women could also work as wage laborers to aid the family economy. In a poor household, which was supported by very little land, both the husband and wife would have to hire out their labor. In larger, more prosperous households, the growing children might also go to work for neighbors, if their labor was not needed on the family holdings. We do not know yet if women received equal pay for equal work. The matter will require considerably more study because of the problems of assessing the nature and difficulty of the tasks performed. For instance, a thatcher received 2d. a day in the thirteenth century but his female assistant received only 1d. Her work was gathering the stubble and handing it up to him while he did the more skilled labor. In general manors hired female laborers and boys for unskilled agrarian tasks with correspondingly low pay. The work of picking over seed grain, however, was a highly skilled occupation in which women, with their more nimble fingers, excelled and, therefore, tended to receive higher pay. When men and women did the same work, they received equal pay. Thus, although women did not normally work for the lord either hoeing or stacking hay, when they did so they received the same pay as men.
Some historians have maintained that, with the decline of population after the Black Death, women's wages became competitive with those of men. More systematic data will have to be accumulated to demonstrate this, however, for the statutory evidence indicates that women were supposed to be paid less than men. A statute of 1388 decreed that women laborers and dairymaids should earn a shilling less a year than the plowman. In a 1444 statute women servants would receive 10s. annually for their work compared to men's 15s., and in 1495 women's labor was to be reimbursed at still only 10s. annually, but men's had gone up to 16s. 8d. 31

The village credit and land markets as well as fairs and regional markets attracted women. A variety of sources show women actively engaged in market activities. For instance, Mabel the Merchant was charged in 1294 in Chalgrave court with taking ash trees. Women made loans to other villagers that are recorded in the court rolls. And there is even a case in the coroners' inquests of a woman who went out to negotiate a debt, leaving her nine-month-old baby alone in the house so that it died of a fire in its cradle. Since women could inherit property and buy it as well, they played a fairly active role in the village land market even after marriage. Married women sometimes sold land they had brought with them to the marriage to help the family through a difficult time, or they might buy or inherit land that would eventually go to a child's marriage portion. Women were somewhat disadvantaged in the marketplace because, while they could bring suit on their own, they had no access to magisterial roles and seldom even used attorneys. Their pledges had to be men although one woman tried to use all women in her case. 34

One can easily overlook the extralegal contributions of both women and men to household ease and even survival. Olwen Hufton has emphasized the economy of makeshift, which both peasant and urban women practiced in preindustrial France. The economy of expediencies included petty illegalities or tolerated transgressions that provided a source of additional food. In France the rioting for bread was the woman's provenance. 35 In medieval England illegal gleaning was the most common way for a woman to get extra grain for her family. Gleaning after the main harvest was regulated on most manors, usually with the provision that only the poor or decrepit could glean, and the community always established the day and hours. But gleaning could be so profitable that wives of even prominent villagers engaged in illegal gleaning. Reaping could pay only 1d. a day for women but gleaning would bring in considerably more. Even being caught and fined was worth the risk because the fines were so low. The illegal gleaners appear in the coroners' inquest when they are caught in the act. Amicia, daughter of Hugh of Wygenale, died warding off an illegal gleaner. She had been hired by Agatha Gylemyn to guard her grain. During the night Cecilia, wife
of Richard le Gardyne, came to steal the grain and threw Amicia to the ground when she tried to stop her. Three illegal gleaners got their punishment through an act of God. They became frightened during a bad storm as they were gleaning illegally and hid in a haystack. Lightning struck them.  

The only limit to these illegal petty economic gains was the imagination. It was common to graze animals on other people's crops, to reap grass illegally, to dig turves and collect nuts and wood in prohibited areas. In Yorkshire, Alice, daughter of Adam son of William, dug a pit for iron and another woman dug up the high road for coal. Women were even occasionally accused of bleeding a cow for blood sausage or clipping sheep in the pasture for their wool. Isabel of Abyndam came to the fields of the Abbess and took three pounds of wool from four sheep there. When the shepherd found her she fought him off so that he was forced to hit her in the legs with his staff in self-defense. She was taken into custody but was so frightened that she refused food and drink and died of hunger. Poultry theft and other petty thefts appear frequently in the records of manor courts.

In clearly felonious activities women also showed their concern for provisioning the family. They stole sheep and poultry rather than larger animals and stole proportionately more household goods and foodstuffs than did men. In the period of famine in the early fourteenth century, female crime increased to 12 percent and then dropped to 9 percent after the period of death.

When the day was done, it was the woman of the house who tucked in the family and turned out the light. We know about this sex-specific role because of the times that she forgot to blow out the candle and it fell to the straw on the floor, setting the house afire. Five percent of women's accidental deaths are attributed to this cause, while among men only aged priests failed to blow out the candle. For instance,

On Tuesday [24 April 1322] a little before midnight the said Robert and Matilda, his wife, and William and John their sons lay asleep in the said solar, a lighted candle fixed on the wall by the said Matilda fell by accident on the bed of the said Robert and Matilda and set the whole house on fire; that the said Robert and William were immediately caught in the flames and burnt and Matilda and John with difficulty escaped with their lives.

We have argued that the woman's sphere of activity centered largely on production for the home, providing both food and supplementary earnings for the household economy. She also reared the children and put them to work in the house and close at an early age. We have yet to investigate the value that her husband and society placed on this contribution. Joan Scott and Louise Tilly have argued that "the separate spheres and separate roles
did not . . . imply discrimination or hierarchy. It appears, on the contrary, that neither sphere was subordinate to the other.”

Literary sources are not neutral in their opinion of women. The clergy did not have a monopoly on the antifemale traditions, and popular lyrics fault women who gossip, cheat, and scold.

Sum be mery and sum be sade,
And sum be besy, and sum be bade;
Sum be wilde, by Seynt Chade;
Yet all be not so,
For sum be lewed,
And sum be shrewed;
Go, Shrew, wherseuer ye go.41

Others praise women for their constancy and counsel and advise men to place their trust in their wives.

ffor by women men be reconsiled,
ffor by women was never man begiled,
ffor they be of the condicio of curtes grysell (Griselda)
ffor they be so meke and myled.42

But even the tyrannical husband indicated that the wife's work was half the productivity of the household and whatever the personal attributes of a wife, laziness would have been the most disastrous.

Other sources are better for assessing appreciation of the wife's contribution than literary ones, because the latter are so steeped in tradition that they are difficult to use. Wills are, perhaps, the best. As a man lay on his deathbed he considered how he could insure his family's well-being and reward all for their contribution to the household economy. The wills show that the men entrusted their wives with considerable responsibilities and rewarded them generously for their contributions during their lifetime. Most men (65 percent) made their wives executors. Others indicated through specific phrases the reliance they placed on their wives. One man left his son a bequest if he would obey his mother, others left the wife responsible for choosing in profession for a son, and one Yorkshire father went to great lengths in his charge to his wife: "that my wiffe have a tendire and faithfull luffe and favour in bryning uppe of hir childir and myne, and she will answer to God and me." He went on to direct her to "reward them after her power for us both."43

The amount of property and responsibility a husband left to his wife depended upon the stage in the life cycle in which a man died. In Howell's study of 193 wills from Kibworth, she found that in the 33 cases in which a
man died leaving children who were all minors, the preference was to give
the wife the tenement and residue to raise the family (42 percent), although
39 percent jointly endowed the wife and a son, and 18 percent bequeathed
everything to the son even though the wife was still alive. When at least
some of the children had reached the age of majority, the inheritance
strategy changed. The mature sons were favored in 41 percent of the wills
while in 29 percent of the cases the wife alone was left the estate and in
another 29 percent the wife with a son inherited it. In the 18 cases in
which the testator died childless, he left his estate to his wife (81 percent)
or the wife and another kinsman (17 percent). 44 In almost all of the wills
the husband preferred to make individual and often more generous arrange-
ments for his wife than simply that of the dower. One man specified that
his wife was to have a place with the second son and receive 20s. annually
from each of the three younger sons when they reached the age of majority,
but if she were not satisfied she could have her dower as provided by law. 45

The men leaving wills, therefore, both rewarded a wife’s services and placed
upon her the responsibility of raising a family of young children and running
both the house and lands. The widow with young children thus had an in-
creased burden for maintaining the household. She would either have to hire
labor in the fields, rely on other family members for aid, or remarry. It was not
tradition alone that kept women from doing the plowing themselves, but
rather their already full work load. Although women tended to outlive men
and were more likely to be widowed, widowers were also left in dire straits in
managing the household economy. They too would have to hire servants or
rely on kin to rear young children and take care of routine household chores. In
the poll tax the great majority of cultivators were married couples. It is rare to
find households of father/daughter or mother/son.

Although wills clearly establish the value and trust a man placed in his
wife on his death bed, they do not indicate how or if he expressed these
sentiments during his lifetime. Battered wives were not common in the
coroners’ inquests or even in the manorial court rolls. In general, although
wife killing was the most common intrafamilial homicide, it accounted for
only about 1 percent of all homicides. The sexes were equal in instances of
committing suicide. Only one case hints at depression arising from a quar-
rel. Isabel, wife of John Aylgard, was going into town with her husband
when she told him that the fire had not been covered. He told her to return
hastily and cover it. Perhaps his words were very rough, for she returned
and hanged herself. 46

Although men and women may have contributed equally to the house-
hold economy, each in their separate spheres, it is difficult to determine
who made the major economic decisions. The moralist writing “How the
Good Wife Taught Her Daughter” recommended that women not g...
the town or get drunk on the money they made from selling cloth, thereby implying that they had control over their butter and eggs money. The law protected women’s rights to their dowry and a husband could not demise it without the wife’s permission. But more than one woman came into court complaining that she had not been consulted about the sale of land or that she feared to cross her husband. Joan, wife of Hugh Forester, is a typical case. She demanded and won the rights to one and a half acres that her husband demised without her permission because she was “not able to gainsay it in his lifetime.”

The argument for a partnership in the peasant marital economy, however, is a persuasive one, even if some husbands were tyrants. Many of the decisions that would have to be made during the course of the marriage would be ones in which mutual expectations or needs would determine the course of action. Both partners shared the common assumption that children should receive a settlement from the accumulated family wealth. If the parents could afford it, girls would receive a dowry and boys would be established with land or an education. The couple would also share assumptions about investment in seed, tools, and household equipment. The needs of the economic unit were common to both. If the couple survived to retirement age, they would have a mutual interest in making arrangements for their support. Land transactions in manorial courts indicate a strong practice of mutual responsibility and decision making. When a villein couple married it was common for the man to come and turn the land back to the lord, taking it again in both his name and that of his wife. Husband and wife also appear in purchasing or leasing pieces of land either for themselves or for their children. They also frequently appear acting in concert in other business matters. While men appeared more frequently in economic transactions, they were not necessarily acting unilaterally, but more likely with some consensus if not consultation. After all, a man would not leave his wife executor after death if he did not have some respect for her economic judgments during life.

The separate spheres of activity probably decreased economic tensions between husband and wife. Even the tyrannical husband of the ballad recognized that there was a basic equation to marital economics. Economists have devised a model for the complementarity of economic roles in traditional marriages that adapts well to peasant marriages. Since the husband, by virtue of his training and his and society’s social values, can function more effectively in the fields and marketplace than the wife and since he has no expertise or inclination for domestic work, he will find it profitable to rely upon his wife for these skills and to share with her the proceeds from his agricultural endeavors. The wife, by virtue of her training and values, functions most efficiently doing tasks related to homemaking.
and, therefore, finds it to her economic benefit to supply these in exchange for her husband's farming expertise. Since neither could easily purchase the skills of the other in hired help, marriage is the most efficient way to pool skills. It is for this reason that remarriage is so common in peasant society when one of the partners dies. Medieval peasant marriages are a classic partnership in which each person contributes a specialized skill that complements the other. One enters such a partnership with the hope that the other person is truly proficient and diligent about providing his or her side of the services.

The peasant family economy, therefore, was based firmly on the partnership of husband and wife, each contributing their separate skills and their separate domains of labor. The initial goods and capital of the woman's dowry helped to set up the household, and her labor and supplemental economic activities kept it going. In the marriage partnership gender ordinarily determined the division of labor, but the goal of both partners was the survival and prosperity of the household unit.

Notes


6. The wills are taken from the full collection for Bedfordshire: Patricia Bell, trans., Bedfordshire Will, 1480–1515, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, XLV (1966), and A. F. Cirket, ed., English Wills, 1498–1526, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, XXXVIII (1956). In using the wills for these figures I have omitted all clerics' wills and those of the few men who were bachelors.


8. English Wills, p. 33.

9. Ibid., pp. 9, 76; Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., Manners and Meals in Olden Times (London, 1868), p. 46.

11. English Wills, p. 80.
12. Ibid., pp. 17–18, 22.
13. Ibid., p. 70.

14. The poll tax returns of 1379–81 show that children over fourteen from established agricultural families and other village youths were listed as servants in the assessments. About a quarter of the villagers were recorded as unmarried servants and single women constituted half or more of these. The position of servant appeared to be a phase in the life cycle of a woman that ended upon marriage. Almost all of the husbandmen and artisans were listed as married. “The Poll Tax of 2–4 R. II, A. D. 1379–81,” Collections for a History of Staffordshire, The William Salt Archaeological Society, XVII (1896), 159, 169, 172–73, and passim. A. Raistrick, “A Fourteenth-Century Regional Survey,” Sociological Review 21 (1929): 242–46.


17. Rossell Hope Robbins, Secular Lyrics of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries (Oxford, 1952), p. 44. Ester Bosserup, Women’s Role in Economic Development (London, 1970), pp. 24–30, maintains that in all plow cultures, plowing is a male role and women seldom do it. There is in the folklore of plow cultures a male sexual connotation to the act of plowing.


20. Bosserup, Women’s Role, pp. 27–29. Carlo Poni, “Family and ‘Podere’ in Emilia Romagna,” The Journal of Italian History I (1978): 201–34, has shown that nineteenth-century Italian peasant women spent more time in the house from November to March, working largely on linen; from April to October their field work surpassed their housework. Their day was often longer than the man’s.


22. Just. 2/78 m. 2. All Justice 2 manuscript citations are taken from the Coroners’ Rolls in the Public Record Office, London.

23. Just. 2/18 m. 19, 2/69 m. 7d.

24. Two percent of women’s accidents came from dealing with animals. See, for instance, Just. 2/67 m. 40d., 2/70 m. 10, 2/86 m. 2. In the latter case a woman had put a ladder against the post of a barn to get straw down for her cows when the ladder broke.

25. Twenty-three percent of the women died in accidents related to supplementary activities such as wood gathering, fishing, and begging. See, for instance, Just. 2/18 m. 11, 2/104 m. 3.

28. Bedfordshire Coroners' Rolls, p. 13. See in addition, Just. 2/67 m. 23, 2/91 m. 4, 2/81 m. 8, 2/106 m. 3.
33. Just. 2/18 m. 44.
39. Just. 2/106 m. 1. See also Just. 2/114 ms. 3, 7, 8, 17.
46. Just. 2/111 m. 15.