

Economic Independence and Women's Marital  
Choice in England, 1400-1500

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## **Abstract**

Economic Independence and Women's Marital Choice in England, 1400-1500

Xuefeng Hu

This thesis investigates the correlation between women's economic independence and marital freedom in the late medieval period and its impact on marriage patterns. The analysis shows that during the golden age of employment after the Black Death (1350-1450), marriage freedom of working women increased along with economic freedom, though the extent to which kind of freedom expanded for women in these years is a matter of scholarly debate. The thesis asks: is the relationship between women's economic independence and marriage common and consistent? Does women's freedom of marriage contribute to the pattern of fewer and later marriages? Comparative studies of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have found that throughout the late Middle Ages women's land inheritance rights remained lower than those of men. As substitutes for the adult male workforce, women were often paid less than men and were disadvantaged occupationally and in terms of status. In the fifteenth century, economic stagnation and economic restructuring caused women more often to be unemployed. Social culture also strengthened the control of women, and their marriages were subject to greater outside interference. Therefore, the consistent social culture, that is, patriarchy, had a greater impact on women's freedom of marriage than changing economic conditions. In addition, the pattern of fewer and later marriages also emerged during the economic stagnation of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries; the thesis concludes that the main reason for women's later and fewer marriages is largely poverty, not women's economic independence.

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## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Chapter 1: Introduction.....   | 1  |
| Chapter 2: Women’s Labour Conditions and Marital Choices in the Decades around 1400.....     | 12 |
| Chapter 3: Women’s Labour Conditions and Marital Choices at the end of the Fifteenth Century | 36 |
| Chapter 4: Conclusion .....  | 63 |
| Bibliography .....   | 68 |

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1489, the records of the Consistory court of the diocese of London indicated that Henry Kyrkeby sued to enforce a marriage he claimed he had made with Eleanor Roberts.<sup>1</sup> The Consistory court was the church tribunal which heard litigation in marital disputes in late medieval England. John at Wode, William Baker, and John Kyrkeby, three witnesses of the plaintiff, all testified that they witnessed a binding exchange of marriage vows between Henry Kyrkeby and Eleanor Roberts. On 2 February 1488, a holiday in medieval England, the feastday of the Purification of the Virgin, Henry took Eleanor's hand, they testified, and said, "I Henry Kyrkeby take you Eleanor Roberts as my wife." Then Eleanor said, "I Eleanor Roberts take you Henry as my spouse," and they kissed one another. This was technically known as an exchange of "present consent," which created a binding marriage contract of the two individuals by late medieval canon law.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the three men's testimony indicated that Henry and Eleanor had made a valid marriage. Eleanor's witnesses, however, disputed this version of events. John Whitypoll, for instance, testified that the previous three witnesses were lying. He testified that Eleanor Roberts was somewhere else and could not have married Henry Kyrkeby on 2 February 1488. He said Eleanor Roberts told him she had left Hornchurch in search of better working conditions and better pay. She became Whitypoll's servant and spent day and night in his house, he said, for the week following 1 February 1488. Considering the distance of twelve miles (too far under medieval travel conditions to go there and back in one day) between his home in

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<sup>1</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Henry Kyrkeby c. Eleanor Roberts," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/01/27/kyrkeby-c-roberts/>.

<sup>2</sup> Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 2–8.

Corringham and Hornchurch, where Kyrkeby's witnesses said the exchange of vows between Eleanor and Henry had taken place, and given that he saw Roberts every day, it was impossible, he contended, that she could have met with Henry Kyrkeby on 2 February 1488. The other three witnesses of the defendant, Andrew Edward, John Anton, and Edmund Brethnam also testified it was impossible for Eleanor to have made the alleged marriage contract because they saw Eleanor in Whitypoll's house on that feast day of the Purification. Thus, witnesses of the defendant denied that Eleanor Roberts and Henry Kyrkeby were married. All we have from this case are these two incompatible sets of stories, and there is no way for us now to know which side was telling the truth.

Although we do not know the outcome of this case from the court records, the details of Eleanor Roberts's work as a servant and her disputed marriage are examples of evidence that offer insight into the relationships among women's labour, marriage, and household status in England in the period after the Black Death. The fact that it was Henry who sued Eleanor to enforce the marriage runs counter to a frequent assumption, that women pushed for marriage and men fled.<sup>3</sup> We do not know why Henry sought the marriage and Eleanor resisted, but clearly Eleanor, working as a servant and with labour mobility, had options. As Whitypoll's testimony suggests, when Eleanor became dissatisfied with her salary in Hornchurch, she moved to Corringham with a different employer who gave her better labour conditions. With more economic opportunities, she had more options in and out of marriage. She could find someone else as a marital partner. According to Edmund Brethnam's testimony, she had married another man, John Baker. If being a wife was not her ambition, she could also have stayed single.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Donahue Jr, "Female Plaintiffs in Marriage Cases in the Court of York in the Later Middle Ages: What Can We Learn from the Numbers?" in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 183–213.

Eleanor's experience showed working women in the late Middle Ages could find work to support themselves. This kind of economic freedom contributed to their marital freedom. However, is Eleanor's example typical? Was the relationship between women's economic independence and marriage common and consistent? What are the specific interactions between women's economic opportunities and their marital choices in England in the late Middle Ages? The relationship between labour and marriage continues to be an obvious issue for women in most parts of the world today. It is one of the basic questions about the interrelationship between social and economic structures. Therefore, it is a topic of enduring importance.

In this thesis, I will examine women's work and their marriages in England in two different periods, both marked by economic change. These periods were chosen because of the availability of evidence and scholarly analysis in a period for which sources for the lives of ordinary people are scattered and scarce. The first is around 1400, two generations after the devastation of the first wave of the Black Death pandemic. The second is the 1480s and 1490s, when the longer-term effects of the significant depopulation had become manifest in English society. At the time of and after the Black Death, England lost half of its population with several repeated visitations.<sup>4</sup> With labour shortage, the relative economic value of labour, including women's labour, increased.<sup>5</sup> Scholars like Caroline M. Barron and P. J. P. Goldberg have argued that this brought new wage-earning opportunities to women, so they had more rights to choose their own ideal marital partners and marry late.<sup>6</sup> As chapter two will explore, not all historians

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce M. S. Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 333.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, *The Great Transition*, 313.

<sup>6</sup> Caroline M. Barron, "The 'Golden Age' of Women in Medieval London," *Reading Medieval Studies* 15 (1989): 35–58; P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c.1300-1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).



agree with Barron and Goldberg about this “Golden Age,” as Barron termed it; those others scholars argue that in the late fourteenth century, the unequal remuneration between male and female workers and the gendered division of labour restricted the economic independence of women.<sup>7</sup> And even proponents of a Golden Age would agree that such rosy times were short-lived. As will be seen in chapter three, by the end of the fifteenth century, as historians generally agree, any economic gains won by women around 1400 had been greatly lessened or even erased. In the late fifteenth century, the economic independence of women was further weakened by social stagnation and women’s marital choice were affected by parents, relatives, employers, and friends more than before.<sup>8</sup> The case of Eleanor Roberts falls in the latter period. Though she seemed to have some labour mobility and exercised agency in her resistance to the marriage that Henry Kyrkeby sought with her, her example must be used cautiously, as late medieval women’s economic independence and its impact on the freedom of marriage may be overestimated.

In order to understand the changing economic situation over the fifteenth century, it is important to look at medium and long-term effects of depopulation caused by the Black Death. The Black Death, also known as the plague, ravaged Europe between 1347 and 1353 and then returned frequently over the next four centuries.<sup>9</sup> Due largely to the plague, the population of England decreased from 5 million in 1348 to 2.25 million by the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Evidence for the effect of this massive mortality on economic and marriage patterns is

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<sup>7</sup> Jane Humphries and Jacob Weisdorf, “The Wages of Women in England, 1260–1850,” *The Journal of Economic History* 75, no. 2 (June 2015): 405–47; Judith M. Bennett, “Wretched Girls, Wretched Boys and the European Marriage Pattern in England (c. 1250–1350),” *Continuity and Change* 34, no. 3 (2019): 315–47; Sandy Bardsley, “Women’s Work Reconsidered: Gender and Wage Differentiation in Late Medieval England,” *Past & Present*, no. 165 (1999): 3–29.

<sup>8</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 74-109.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Bailey, *After the Black Death: Economy, Society, and the Law in Fourteenth--Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 1.

inconsistent and the relationship between the two is not clear. Therefore, the thesis aims to consider the problem by picking two moments, around 1400 and in the 1480s and 1490s, for comparison. It assumes that the economic factors had an obvious impact on women's freedom of marriage both at the end of the fourteenth century and the late fifteenth century in England, but religion and other cultural factors also played important roles.

Through the later Middle Ages and beyond, most English people below the landholding classes followed a particular marriage regime that John Hajnal in 1965 termed the Northwest European Marriage Pattern. Hajnal posited that in this pattern, marriage rates and thus fertility were comparatively low, and both sexes married late (typically mid-to-high twenties for men and early to mid-twenties for women) and most families were nuclear, while an important part of the population remained single.<sup>11</sup> According to P. J. P. Goldberg, this marriage pattern also manifested life-cycle servanthood, in which virtually every young individual in late medieval England in the life stage before marriage (from ages twelve or fourteen to mid-twenties) would leave their homes to live and work in strangers' households as servants.<sup>12</sup> Under the supervision of their employers, boys learned a trade, perhaps as an enrolled apprentice; girls learned manners and housekeeping; both saved wages for future marriages.<sup>13</sup> Servants stayed single until they saved enough money to get married, which contributed to later and fewer marriages.

Hajnal indicated that this typical pattern appeared between 1400 and 1650, after the Black Death. However, other historians like Judith M. Bennett and Richard M. Smith have argued that the presence of late marriages and a high number who never married had already existed in the thirteenth century, before the Black Death. Therefore, this pattern was not caused

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<sup>11</sup> J. Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective," in *Population in History* (London: Routledge, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, chap. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Goldberg, *Women in England*, 87.

by the plague.<sup>14</sup> As Bennet suggests, due to poverty before the plague, many people were not able to get married. Marriage requires a degree of financial independence. Before the Black Death, the economy in England had been stagnant. Many people who had no land and jobs therefore lived in poverty.<sup>15</sup> Those rural poor often could not afford to get married, so they married late or stayed unmarried. Therefore, before the plague, poverty decreased marriage rates and increased ages at first marriage. The marriage model also fitted the characteristics of the northwestern European marriage pattern—later and fewer marriages.

This may be evidenced by the high marriage rate in the short term after the Black Death. As the population collapsed, survivors had a greater chance of inheriting wealth. The labour shortage had led to a sharp increase in the employment rate, and it was easier for both men and women to find paid work and obtain the material basis for marriage. Due to the strong motivation to marry, the marriage rate has risen in the short term. For many women, it was economically beneficial to get married, as men had much more access to wealth and income. Being a wife was considered socially desirable, and it gave women the opportunity to have children in the context of a family and to have, possibly, the affection and companionship of a husband. However, once a woman got married, she gave up her independent property rights and became dependent on her husband. There was less evidence to show whether married women had accrued more rights. As Judith M. Bennett argued, a married woman may have had informal power to influence her husband's decisions, but she lacked the power to make these decisions in

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<sup>14</sup> Judith M. Bennett, "Wretched Girls.,"; Richard M. Smith, "Some Reflections on the Evidence for the Origins of the 'European Marriage Pattern' in England," *The Sociological Review* 28, no. 1 (1980): 74–112.

<sup>15</sup> Bennett, "Wretched Girls," 320–24.

her own right.<sup>16</sup> This may be the reason why women married late in the fourteenth century.

As will be explained in chapter 2, by about 1400, the marriage rate had dropped markedly, with a significant proportion of the population never marrying; those who did marry did so relatively late, around age 25. In the long term, shortage of male labour due to shrinking population created more opportunities for women to support themselves and earn dowries, so they could make more independent choices about marriage. However, this freedom was limited by patriarchy in the economic sphere. As a substitute for adult male labour, women were usually paid less than men, and they were also at a disadvantage in terms of occupation and status. In addition, their land inheritance rights were consistently lower than men's. Therefore, the economic and marital freedom of fourteenth-century women should not be overestimated.

For example, fourteenth-century widows could choose to remain at the head of a household without remarrying and they enjoyed more public authority and legal autonomy.<sup>17</sup> However, these certain advantages of legal widowhood already existed before the plague; moreover, widows' remarriage rates remained high before and after the plague.<sup>18</sup> Legal widowhood also did not challenge the gender hierarchy in the household. If there were adult men in the family, they were automatically the head of the household. In addition to those wealthy widows who enjoyed freedom, poor widows should also be considered. For them, a poor life without support from husbands after the plague was much worse.<sup>19</sup> This proved that except for

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<sup>16</sup> Judith M. Bennett, "Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 18–36.

<sup>17</sup> Mavis E. Mate, *Daughters, Wives, and Widows after the Black Death: Women in Sussex, 1350-1535* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1998), 133.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, "Some Reflections," 94.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Lord Smail, "Accommodating Plague in Medieval Marseille," *Continuity and Change* 11, no. 1 (May 1996), 33.

those with power and freedom, widows tended to experience poverty. Therefore, at best the benefits of the reduced population for widows' status were mixed.

Moreover, women's economic and marital freedom in the fourteenth century was short-lived. In the late fifteenth century, the shrinkage of employment opportunities due to economic stagnation made male labour plentiful again rather than scarce.<sup>20</sup> In addition, artisan and merchant guilds that controlled skilled training and the right to trade in their occupations increasingly excluded women and immigrants.<sup>21</sup> Together, the growing proto-industrialization of manufacturing processes as piece-work production chains meant that there was low-status and insecure work available for unskilled labourers, many of whom were women and immigrants. These marginalized labourers worked for those English-born male guild members.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, women's economic independence declined, and they had to rely more on marriage to support their lives. They also relied more on the family to prepare the dowry, so the family interfered more with their marriage. What's more, the fifteenth century strengthened its control over women and pushed them to marry. In general, women's marriage choices were more influenced by family, employers, and other advisors than in the fourteenth century.

However, even with stronger marriage motives, the marriage pattern of women in the fifteenth century was the same as that in the fourteenth century, showing the characteristics of later marriage and fewer marriages. In urban areas such as London, it was mainly from their own choice that people married first in their twenties with partners of a similar age: despite the greater

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce M. S. Campbell, *The Great Transition*, 352–53; Jim Bolton, “‘The World Upside Down’: Plague as an Agent of Economic and Social Change,” in *The Black Death in England*, ed. W. M. Ormrod and P.G. Lindley (Donington, Lincolnshire England: Shaun Tyas, 2003), 57; Goldberg, *Women in England*, 32.

<sup>21</sup> Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working women*, 37–42.

<sup>22</sup> P. J. P Goldberg, *Medieval England: A Social History 1250-1550* (London: Arnold, 2004), 211.

involvement of family and employers, and the economic strictures underpinning marriage, the testimonies in marital litigation do show that most people, both men and women, were active in their marriage choices rather than having them entirely controlled by others.<sup>23</sup> In both rural areas such as Essex and in the city of London, many people remained unmarried.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the pattern of marriage in the late fifteenth century followed the Northwestern European Pattern. However, the reasons for later and fewer marriages were different from those in the fourteenth century, but similar to those in the thirteenth century. It was poverty that caused later and fewer marriages. In addition, the heightened gender imbalance brought about by urbanization during this period also contributed to the low marriage rate. This will be explained in chapter 3.

The thesis has four chapters, including this introduction. The second chapter focuses on women's labour conditions and marital choices in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. As original sources for this earlier period have not been possible to access, this chapter relies on what other historians have written, focusing on scholarly debates. It serves as the basis for the investigation of primary sources in chapter 3, which focuses on women's labour and marriage between the 1480s and 1490s. This chapter relies mainly on the Consistory database, which presents translations of records of marital litigation in the diocese of London, along with other sources in edited collections. It is a longer chapter, investigating how questions posed in the second chapter might be answered by evidence for the later fifteenth century. The fourth chapter is the conclusion of the thesis.

I will use records of marital litigation in the online Consistory database as my main

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<sup>23</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> L. R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex 1350-1525* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18.

primary source.<sup>25</sup> In the late Middle Ages, marriage was sacrament, but it was not performed by a priest but by the married individuals. People getting married had to exchange consent, which was called a contract. It could be made by present tense “I take you X to be my wedded wife or husband,” or created by future tense “I will take you” followed by sexual intercourse to complete the marriage. An unfulfilled marriage contract entered by future consent could be dissolved by mutual consent, or if one party entered into a present tense contract with another.<sup>26</sup> This led to marriage litigations. The exchange of marriage consent could be done without a church; only the consent of two married individuals was required, no one else’s consent was necessary. This could lead to a variety of problems, including impulsive marriage vows that were later regretted, opposition from family members to the marriage, a lack of convincing witnesses to prove the validity of the marriage, and the possibility of repeated marriages. These cases thus provide a great deal of material to study women’s marital freedom.

The records of these London Consistory court cases are rich, but they have limits. The vast majority of the entries in the Deposition Book, which covers the years from 1486 to 1497, are witness statements and the examination of the parties to the lawsuit. The other documents relating to the lawsuit – parties’ statements of claim from which the witnesses were questioned and the judges’ decisions and sentences, for instance – have failed to survive. Nonetheless, the depositions provide specific details of what happened, including when, where, and who was involved. The records also include biographical information about the witnesses, such as their address, age, and occupation, as well as when and where they testified. The records reveal witnesses’ affiliations with both plaintiffs and defendants, highlighting different factions among

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<sup>25</sup> “About the Consistory,” *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/the-consistory/#back3>.

<sup>26</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 4-8.

them and potential bias in their testimony.

If incomplete – the records, for instance, do not indicate who won the cases – this source reveals better than other sources the marital and economic situations of women outside the elite. This is the reason why most of the scholarships on marriage in this period use these sources. The database offers testimonies in the London Consistory Court, which is the main church court of the diocese of London, an ecclesiastical jurisdiction that included the medieval city of London itself and its rural hinterland of Essex, Middlesex, and parts of Hertfordshire.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, this source is useful to study women's marriage and labour in both urban and rural areas. Most of the cases were matrimonial cases, but they provided not only details of women's marriages but also evidence of women's labour conditions. This will be explained more comprehensively in chapter 3.

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<sup>27</sup> "About the Consistory," *Consistory Database*.



## **Chapter 2: Women's Labour Conditions and Marital Choices in the Decades around 1400**

### *Marriage patterns after the plague*

The severe mortality of the Black Death produced both short-term and long-term effects on marriage patterns. Because of strong marriage motivations, marriage rates increased in the short term. However, by about 1400, marriage rates were falling, a substantial minority of people never marrying; and those who did marry married relatively late, in their mid-twenties. In addition, low marriage rates and late ages at first marriage affected the birth rate, so the fertility did not rise in the long term, exacerbating the demographic collapse.<sup>1</sup> The question is why: was this a free choice, due especially to women's greater economic independence, or did women's economic situation remain consistently lower than men's in wages and opportunities? This is the "Golden Age" debate regarding women's status and marriage choices in the decades around 1400.

Scholars who support the idea that this level of depopulation following the plague greatly benefited women's labour opportunities and economic independence have argued that the changed demographics led to a labour shortage, therefore contributing to more female employment opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Before the Black Death, England reached its highest population at around 1300 and was flooded with a job-hungry and underemployed workforce.<sup>3</sup> However, the English population fell from perhaps 5.5 million people in June 1348 to 2.8 million in December 1349 because of the plague.<sup>4</sup> Due to the massive loss of life, the labour market changed

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<sup>1</sup> Bolton, "'The World Upside Down'," 35; Poos, *A Rural Society*, 121.

<sup>2</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*; Barron, "The 'Golden Age' of Women."

<sup>3</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 7; Poos, *A Rural Society*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 135.

profoundly. Employment rates grew substantially, and it was easier for both men and women to find work than before. In addition, though the government tried to control labour values, workers generally received higher wages after the plague.<sup>5</sup> They also showed significant occupational flexibility, such as the preference for short-term contracts and increasing mobility in search of better labour conditions.<sup>6</sup> As some scholars have contended, women had access to these labour opportunities as well as men. More women were hired to accomplish tasks that were not gender-specific, such as weeding and harvesting. Like men, they presented greater mobility in their career. In general, these scholars argue, the population of independent female workers grew rapidly in peasant society and in the towns after the plague.<sup>7</sup> It also led to a rise of female heirs and widows. According to this interpretation, as a result, there was an increase of women's economic status after the plague. Women had more possibilities of supporting themselves, so they could make more independent choice about marriage. This led to a rise in the marriage rate in the short-term following the Black Death, but a decline in the long term.

Firstly, there was a rise in the marriage rate in the short term (1345-1375) after the plague. The number of people decreased by 40 per cent to 50 per cent, but in the very first years following the mortality the number of marriages increased by two to three times, in line with a general soaring of the marriage rate in Europe.<sup>8</sup> In France, at Givry in Burgundy, where between 11 and 29 marriages a year had been celebrated between 1336 and 1341, no weddings were recorded during the plague year of 1348 but 86 took place the next year and 33 in 1350.<sup>9</sup> In England, there is no direct evidence to prove that the marriage rate rose as rapidly after the

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<sup>5</sup> Bailey, 80.

<sup>6</sup> Mavis E. Mate, "Work and Leisure," in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 282.

<sup>7</sup> Bolton, "'The World Upside Down'," 72.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, *The Great Transition*, 352; Bolton, "'The World Upside Down'," 40.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, *The Great Transition*, 352.

plague, but indirect evidence indicates a pattern similar to that in France. In the Lincolnshire Marshes in the East Midlands of England, of the five estates belonging to Spalding Abbey, the merchet payment, which was the fee paid by a serf woman to be allowed to marry in 1350, was three times as high as it had been before the plague.<sup>10</sup> This evidence suggests that there was indeed a “marriage rush” in England shortly after the plague.

Why was there a “marriage rush”? Both marriage motivations and social-economic conditions were important factors to explain this dramatic rise in marriage rates. As will be discussed below, most medieval English laypeople wanted to get married for social, economic, and personal reasons. However, before the plague it was difficult for some people to get married due largely to poverty. Some of the “marriage rush” was from pent-up demand from the years of the plague itself: as with many aspects of life, the plague pandemic was an obstacle for marriage and thus once the pandemic ended, people got married as soon as possible. Secondly and more importantly, however, before the Black Death it had been hard for people who did not have the material basis, such as land or dowry, to establish a new household and find a marital partner.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, when the post-plague economic environment offered more inheritance of land, more labour opportunities, and better pay as the economic foundation for marriage, people were able to enter into marriages they had not previously been able to contemplate.

However, in the longer term, the mortality of the plague caused the opposite phenomenon: late marriages and singlehood became common or (as some scholars have argued) returned as the usual medieval English marriage pattern. As will be discussed at greater length below, the dramatic depopulation during the plague led to labour shortages, prompting an influx of unmarried women into towns and cities to find work. For some historians, this gave women

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<sup>10</sup> Campbell, 352.

<sup>11</sup> Bennett, “Wretched Girls.”

more choice: they could choose to stay single or marry late after finding paid work to support themselves. They could continue their independent working lives and delay marriages.

Or, as scholars such as Judith Bennett and Sandy Bardsley have contended, for some women these were not choices they made but circumstances forced on them by the post-plague economic shifts. Poverty itself may have been somewhat alleviated, but other factors came into play: gendered migration patterns, for instance, meant that women who migrated to towns and cities moved to settlements with many more women than men.<sup>12</sup> Evidence indicates that the number of single women increased after the plague. The 1377 poll tax returns indicated that at least one-third of all adult women in England had never married or were widows.<sup>13</sup> Rural areas, such as Essex, showed the rate of women who married decreased to less than 65 per cent in 1381.<sup>14</sup>

Post-plague economic changes made women's labour opportunities – especially in domestic service – much more likely in towns and cities. Though young women were more likely to find domestic service positions in towns and so there tended to be more marriageable women in towns, this resulted in the increased likelihood that a woman would not marry, something that was likely a drawback for some and a benefit for others.<sup>15</sup> How we interpret the high number of single women in English society – as a choice women could make or as a negative effect of lack of marriage opportunities – depends to a great extent on the historian, though it clearly also varied from medieval woman to medieval woman. Goldberg, whose scholarship on women, servanthood, and marriage has been foundational, has argued largely for

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<sup>12</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, chap. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), chap. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Poos, *A Rural Society*, 153.

<sup>15</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, 372.

the positive interpretation. He pointed out that servants always lived in the household they served, apart from their birth families. They were more likely to make independent marital choices without their parents' guidance and they were much less likely to be forced into marriage. In rural societies, women first married in their late teens or early twenties; in towns, they married later, usually nearer their mid-twenties. The age differences between husbands and wives were men four years older than women in rural areas and three years in urban areas, which showed the greater potential in urban unions for "companionate marriages,"<sup>16</sup> though the difference is slight. Both men and women contributed to their nuclear family household in this marriage pattern.

Therefore, though there was a "marriage rush" to reconstruct households and therefore rebuild the society in the short term after the plague, the marriage pattern in the long term reverted to the Northwest European Marriage Pattern. Before the plague, it was poverty that decreased marriage rates and increased marriage ages. After the plague, historians disagree whether it was economic autonomy and marital freedom that gave women chances to marry late or not marry, or whether women continued to have little choice.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Barron's and Goldberg's arguments for women's agency and economic independence in relation to their marriages was very important. Other scholars argued in the 1990s and later, however, that the "Golden Age" was overrated, manifesting only for a short time, or not manifesting at all.<sup>17</sup> These scholars have argued that patriarchal hierarchies played a more important role in women's work and marriage than demographic changes.<sup>18</sup> Even

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<sup>16</sup> Goldberg, *Woman is a worthy right*, 112.

<sup>17</sup> Sandy Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered," 3–29; McIntosh, *Working women*; Humphries and Weisdorf, "The Wages of Women in England," 405–47; Bennett, "Wretched Girls."

<sup>18</sup> Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered," 2.

in times of labour shortage, women were often low-status, low-grade, low-paid secondary workers compared to men.<sup>19</sup> As Bardsley has argued, the post-Black Death land market and inheritance patterns did not improve women's access to land in the agricultural economy.<sup>20</sup> Bennett contends that a "patriarchal equilibrium" ensured that even as the economy changed, women's political and social ranks did not rise within the consistent gender hierarchy.<sup>21</sup> These economic changes before and after the plague will be explored in more detail in the next section.

### *The economic transition in land and labour*

The Black Death was, in Bruce Campbell's phrase, part of a "great transition" in the social-economic environment of late medieval Eurasia generally, including England.<sup>22</sup> Before the plague, the English economy was on the rise from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries but slowed down in the early fourteenth century. As the population increased with economic development, the supply of labour exceeded demand, therefore unemployment increased, and average wages fell.<sup>23</sup> The rural population was increasingly under economic pressure, with around half of farmers having insufficient land to provide them with a secure livelihood.<sup>24</sup> Living standards were low for most of the population.<sup>25</sup> Then, wars and famines occurring during the late 1310s led to a series of crises in the English agricultural economy, along with depopulation.

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<sup>19</sup> Bardsley, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Sandy Bardsley, "Peasant Women and Inheritance of Land in Fourteenth-Century England," *Continuity and Change* 29, no. 3 (2014): 297–324.

<sup>21</sup> Judith M. Bennett, *History matters: patriarchy and the challenge of feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), chap. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 1; Campbell, *The Great Transition*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* London: Routledge, 2010, 26–41.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c. 1200–1520*, Cambridge Medieval Textbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7, 275.

The number of sheep and cattle halved due to epizootics, drastically reducing the supply of wool and meat, and food prices almost doubled, with grain prices particularly high.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the wars and famines, the Black Death, arriving first in England in 1348 but with continued visitations until the seventeenth century, had also caused a huge population decline, resulting in a labour shortage and a corresponding rise in wages.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the living standards of survivors generally improved.<sup>28</sup>

After the plague, the labour market underwent significant changes. As the English population decreased by about one-half to only 2 million or 2.5 million after the plague, labour resources became scarce, and the surviving labour force demanded higher remuneration, otherwise they refused to work.<sup>29</sup> Some sources seem to suggest powerful bargaining positions for labourers; the 1351 Statute of Labourers, for instance, stipulated that servants could choose not to work unless they had “living [in food] and wages double or triple of what they want to take in the second year [of the king’s reign: i.e. in 1346-7] and earlier”.<sup>30</sup> Evidence suggests that there was some truth to this, though not nearly to the rate of doubling or tripling, at least in the short term. The labour shortage gave workers more freedom to negotiate salaries and as a result, employers had to give workers higher wages. Average wages rose generally after 1350.<sup>31</sup> Threshing wages in 1366-70 were 25 per cent higher than they had been in 1341-5.<sup>32</sup> Wages continued to rise, with some ups and downs, but a general upward trend from the mid-1370s.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Bolton, “‘The World Upside Down’,” 26.

<sup>28</sup> Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 9–25, 29–30.

<sup>29</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 135; Christopher Dyer, *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England* (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2000), 38.

<sup>30</sup> Maurice Keen, *English society in the Later Middle Ages, 1348-1500*, Penguin social history of Britain (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 38.

<sup>31</sup> Humphries and Weisdorf, “The Wages of Women in England,” 417–18.

<sup>32</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Bailey, 253.

From the mid-14th century to the 15th century, the real income of rural construction workers doubled, and per capita wages in England tripled.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, labour value increased in the post-plague period. In addition, survivors of the plague got more labour opportunities. Young people usually worked as apprentices and domestic servants. After the plague, the demand for servants had increased, so they had more job opportunities. Their labours were valued because, working at all seasons, they could care for livestock at all hours throughout the year.<sup>35</sup> Therefore servants had more bargaining power. As previously mentioned, they required remuneration in kind and cash. The great depopulation relieved the pressure of high unemployment and poverty before the Black Death.

What's more, workers enjoyed more labour freedom. After earning enough to support their lives, wage-earners could choose to take leisure.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, workers of the late fourteenth century preferred the freedom of flexible short-term contracts.<sup>37</sup> In addition, they could move to seek better labour conditions, which reflected the increase of labour mobility. The post-plague economy expanded quickly and caused immeasurable urbanization.<sup>38</sup> Migration from the countryside to towns and cities increased. Unmarried workers, especially construction workers and harvesters, had become increasingly mobile and might travel seven miles or more in search of the best possible employment conditions.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, the plague increased chances for survivors to access land and estates, though women benefited less than men. Due to the depopulation, survivors had more opportunities to inherit land. There was a lack of male heirs

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<sup>34</sup> Horrox and Ormrod, *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, 216; Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 253; Poos, *A Rural Society*, 209.

<sup>35</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 170.

<sup>36</sup> Goldberg, 166.

<sup>37</sup> Mate, "Work and Leisure," 281.

<sup>38</sup> Dyer, *The Problem of Labour*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Mate, "Work and Leisure," 281.



after the plague: in southern England, over 50 per cent of men would not have surviving sons and 30 per cent of them would have no surviving sons and daughters.<sup>40</sup>

The changes in the land and labour market influenced labour relations. Firstly, landowners faced the choice of giving workers higher wages to compete for labour or leaving land idle.<sup>41</sup> The difficulty of hiring labour greatly increased the operating costs for employers.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, their incomes were threatened. Secondly, before the Black Death, labour was often bound to land. Under the manorial system, landholders (the nobility and gentry) occupied most of the wealth of the society.<sup>43</sup> But the labour shortage brought on by the Black Death upset the balance and freed manpower. After peasants had certain leverage, serfdom began to disintegrate.<sup>44</sup> As urban-rural mobility increased, serfs also wanted to go to towns to find better jobs. After the plague, cities and towns absorbed a large influx of migrants from the countryside.<sup>45</sup> The absence of the labor force due to the loss of rural population posed a threat of land abandonment and closure of rural handicraft workshops. The landlord class saw rising wages as a sign of social unrest and disobedience and took coercive measures.<sup>46</sup> In response to this, the government formulated labour legislation to restrict the freedom of labour.

In 1349, King Edward III and the parliament passed The Ordinance of Laborers, fixing wages at pre-plague levels.<sup>47</sup> It took compulsory measures to limit the wages of employees, and those who violated the order were to be punished with heavy fines such as imprisonment. In the decades that followed, labour laws were enforced with brutal determination. The Statute of

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<sup>40</sup> Bolton, “‘The World Upside Down’,” 35.

<sup>41</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 166.

<sup>42</sup> Dyer, *The Problem of Labour*, 24–26.

<sup>43</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 8–10.

<sup>44</sup> Bailey, 283–313.

<sup>45</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 46–48.

<sup>46</sup> Goldberg, 167–68.

<sup>47</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 77.

Laborers (1351) applied to all able-bodied persons and was strictly enforced.<sup>48</sup> It limited the occupational and geographic mobility of workers.<sup>49</sup> These labour laws were efficient to a certain extent, but employers sometimes were forced to give workers incentives to keep them in their workforce.<sup>50</sup> To avoid the desolation of the land, landowners had to make a compromise, substituting monetary rent for labour.<sup>51</sup> With the disintegration of serfdom, the peasants who gained freedom in life continued to migrate in search of higher wages.<sup>52</sup> Free circulation also accelerated the process of urbanization. While wages rose, prices of staple goods fell sharply from the mid-1370s and remained low, so the living standards of ordinary people improved, which made it easier for people to accumulate wealth.<sup>53</sup>

On the one hand, this all suggests that the arguments Barron and Goldberg made about a Golden Age for workers in general and women in particular has evidential support: common people, men as well as women, seem to have had more economic autonomy than before the plague. But as scholars like Bardsley and Bennett have suggested, women did not necessarily share in the greater prosperity to the same extent as men. For instance, regarding land access, the overall picture from a variety of fourteenth century manors suggested little change in the gendering of tenancy patterns.<sup>54</sup> Compared to men, women were disadvantaged heirs after the plague — sons inherited before daughters. And collateral male relatives were also preferred: nephews, brothers, grandsons, uncles, and other male kin had more chances to inherit land.<sup>55</sup> Gender differences in inheriting remained consistent: women's land holdings were usually

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<sup>48</sup> Keen, *English society*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Mate, "Work and Leisure," 280–81.

<sup>50</sup> Poos, *A Rural Society*, 220.

<sup>51</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 90–102.

<sup>52</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, 289.

<sup>53</sup> Bailey, *After the Black Death*, 11.

<sup>54</sup> Bardsley, "Peasant Women," 302.

<sup>55</sup> Bardsley, 298.

smaller and/or of lesser value than those of men, both before and after the plague.<sup>56</sup> The difficulty of finding labour after the plague would be the main reason for women giving up their inheritance or the manor court choosing a male tenant. As Bardsley has argued, a structure of gendered landholding as primarily male was the main cause.<sup>57</sup> The patriarchal structure was not only present in rural areas, but also in the urban labour market. Although in the short-term women had more working opportunities due to labour shortages, their wages were always lower than men, as before the pandemic.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the economic status of unmarried women improved, but this change was limited both in scale and duration.

Regarding the positive new situation for labour, Bennett and others have pointed out that new opportunities and higher wages were not available to all equally or in the same measure; the extent to which women shared in these benefits remains a matter of debate. Those scholars point out that women's labour was seen as unskilled, and women were always seen as a child-like category.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, women were usually paid less than men as a substitute for adult male labour, as will be discussed in more detail below. Working women's labour mobility greatly increased after the plague, including piece work in the urban cloth industry, for instance. More women than men were moving to towns, taking positions as household servants and as cloth workers. These occupations, however, were low-status and poorly paid. The gendered migration patterns also introduced significant sex ratio imbalances in towns (with important effects for marriage formation, as we will see below): for example, the sex ratio of migration in 1377 was

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<sup>56</sup> Bardsley, 305.

<sup>57</sup> Bardsley, 320.

<sup>58</sup> Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered."

<sup>59</sup> P. J. P. Goldberg, "Life and Death: The Ages of Man" in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 419.

92.7 men for every 100 women in Hull, and 89.7 at Carlisle.<sup>60</sup>

*Gender, labour, and economic change*

Tied to the influential “Golden Age” view is an argument that late medieval England was a positive era for women regarding their economic and marital freedom. However, this view has been substantially challenged in several ways by scholars from the mid-1990s forward, as we have just seen. Historians such as Judith M. Bennett, Sandy Bardsley, Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, Jane Humphries and Jacob Weisdorf have questioned both the rise of women’s economic status associated with the labour conditions following the Black Death and argued that in addition, women’s status in the household and society remained consistently low relative to men through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>61</sup> The increase of women’s freedom to make independent marital choice, they have argued, has also been overvalued. This view – which currently constitutes something like a consensus – thus suggests that the “Golden Age” was overrated. The constant gender hierarchy or the “patriarchal equilibrium,” as Bennett has termed it, endured remarkably to affect women’s labour and marriage choices even in the face of massive population loss during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>62</sup>

As we’ve seen, after Hajnal, Caroline M. Barron argued that the demographic crisis resulted in a temporary rise in London women’s economic status and marital freedom in the “Golden Age” of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>63</sup> Not long after, Goldberg connected these various strands in his *Women, Work, and Life Cycle* (1992). His statistics and his overall

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<sup>60</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 172.

<sup>61</sup> Judith M. Bennett, “Medieval Women, Modern Women,” 147–75; Sandy Bardsley, “Women’s Work Reconsidered,” 3–29.

<sup>62</sup> Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters*.

<sup>63</sup> Barron, “The ‘Golden Age’ of Women.”

analysis showed that Yorkshire women participated in labour in large numbers and delayed or avoided marriage altogether in late medieval England. He looked at women's work as domestic servants in their life cycle before their marriage and hypothesized that the increase of women's labour opportunities after the Black Death contributed to the increase of women's freedom of marital choices.<sup>64</sup> Responding to this, anti- "Golden Age" historians such as Judith M. Bennett, Sandy Bardsley, Jane Humphries and Jacob Weisdorf argued that women suffered discrimination in the labour market. They have argued that women suffered gender discrimination in the labour market in terms of occupational status and wages. Although women benefited from labour shortages, access to more labour opportunities, and higher wages, they were considered as second-rate workers.<sup>65</sup> Women rarely had the same independent occupational status as men and were usually paid less than men.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, the rise of their economic independence and status were restricted by the consistent gender hierarchy in the labour market.

On the one hand, in the decades immediately following the Black Death, because of the shortage of male labour, women were more engaged in the labour market outside the household than they had been previously (or would be after). Poll tax sources from the 1370s indicate a wider range of women's economic activities in textile, metal, and even leather trades than in the pre-plague era.<sup>67</sup> Women were also particularly active in selling fish: in 1379, all eighteen standard stalls at Cheapside and the North Gate of St. Paul were rented out to women. Also, women often seemed to own ale houses or inns, thus participating in the drink trades.<sup>68</sup> In addition, women worked as substitutes for male labour. In some places, women were employed

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<sup>64</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*; P. J. P. Goldberg, *Woman is a worthy right: women in English society c. 1200-1500* (Wolfeboro Falls, NH: Alan Sutton, 1992), 109.

<sup>65</sup> Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered," 28.

<sup>66</sup> Bardsley, 5, 19–22.

<sup>67</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, 99.

<sup>68</sup> Barron, "The 'Golden Age' of Women," 47.

in occupations previously held by men. Due to the shortage of skilled labour, women could find jobs that once belonged to men, such as blacksmiths, tanners, carpenters, bricklayers, etc.<sup>69</sup>

Women were also more involved in agriculture and animal husbandry, working on dairy farms and sheep pens.<sup>70</sup> They were more often employed to perform gender-neutral tasks such as weeding, harvesting, and hay. By this evidence, women had more labour opportunities after plague.

However, on the other hand, few women enjoyed a single occupational status like men. Women's economic activities were always considered as secondary to those of men, and female labour was only a substitute for male labour.<sup>71</sup> Women were rarely trained to enable them to enter artisanal crafts and were therefore unlikely to have a visible major occupation.<sup>72</sup> Even during the period of male labour shortage, more female labourers were found in traditionally "feminine" work which had little formal training, instead of male work. Women were hardly found in the mercantile sector.<sup>73</sup> Instead, most of them stayed in the types of work considered suitable for women, such as making and selling drinks and producing textiles or clothing.<sup>74</sup> Many were essentially self-employed or performed unpaid domestic work. As a result, women's work was devalued as unskilled and "second-rate" compared to men.<sup>75</sup> Their economic status did not rise along with labour opportunities.

Secondly, though women normally got higher pay after the plague than they had received

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<sup>69</sup> S. H. Rigby, "Introduction: Social Structure and Economic Change in Late Medieval England," in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 16.

<sup>70</sup> Mate, "Work and Leisure," 282.

<sup>71</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 7; Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered," 22–23.

<sup>72</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, 103–4.

<sup>74</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 252.

<sup>75</sup> McIntosh, 7; Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered," 4–5.

before, gender discrimination in wages remained consistent. Due to the labour shortage after the plague, women had benefited from a disproportionate increase in wages for unskilled workers and a narrowing of wage differentials.<sup>76</sup> From the mid-1300s to the 1500s, women's daily wages from short-term work exceeded the equivalent in an annualized salary.<sup>77</sup> They could get high seasonal wages in the harvest.<sup>78</sup> Sometimes, it was possible for women to receive the same wages as men in certain positions.<sup>79</sup> In addition to female labourers, servants and married women could also participate in seasonal paid work. For example, Isabel Clerk, a married woman in York, was presented in 1363 for violating the Statute of Labourers, in working in neighboring Moreby for 6d a day through the autumn harvest.<sup>80</sup> In general, women benefited from higher wages from labour shortages in the decades immediately following the plague.

However, despite these more favourable indications for the value of female labour in some circumstances, women usually had lower status and were paid less than men.<sup>81</sup> As Bennett argued, medieval women faced a consistent wage gap with average wages being only three-quarters of men's wages.<sup>82</sup> According to Bardsley, the highest paid female worker earned the same as the minimum wage male worker.<sup>83</sup> For example, in Norfolk presentments between 1378 and 1379, payments for harvesters varied from 3d. to 10d. per day. One female earned 3d. a day for work, three males worked for 4d. a day, one male mowed variously for 8d. and 10d. daily, other males worked for 9d. and 10d.<sup>84</sup> The highest-paid female harvesters earned about the same

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<sup>76</sup> Rigby, "Introduction," 16.

<sup>77</sup> Humphries and Weisdorf, "The Wages of Women in England," 407.

<sup>78</sup> Goldberg, *Women in England*, 25.

<sup>79</sup> Poos, *A Rural Society*, 216–17.

<sup>80</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 170.

<sup>81</sup> Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered," 5.

<sup>82</sup> Judith M. Bennett, "Medieval Women, Modern Women," 147-175.

<sup>83</sup> Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered," 5, 22.

<sup>84</sup> Bardsley, 23.

as the lowest-paid male workers. Though some women earned similar wages to men, individual female workers could not represent the collective.<sup>85</sup> Poos's book also recorded that a woman's day's work at Porter's Hall was obviously less expensive than men's work. Although this difference was not apparent during harvest, it was significant at other times.<sup>86</sup> As a result, the proportion of rural women's wages relative to men's wages remained consistent before and after the plague.<sup>87</sup> The constant significant gender difference in wages indicated that women's economic status essentially did not rise after the plague.

In addition, women's labour mobility increased. The case of Eleanor Roberts with which I started this thesis shows that working women could move to seek better labour conditions. Also, as previously argued in the first section of this chapter, there were more women than men who migrated from the countryside to towns and cities. One explanation could be to find more opportunities to serve as domestic servants, the main employment option for young women. As described earlier, servanthood was part of the life cycle for medieval adolescents, who left their families in their early teens to live and work in others' households as domestic help.<sup>88</sup> As the demand for women servants was greatest in towns, many young women chose to come to towns as servants.<sup>89</sup> The rural-urban migration gave these working women more chances to find marital partners outside parental supervision, which increased their marital freedom.

Again, however, the evidence for women's greater potential in the post-plague period for economic and social independence can be countered by other kinds of evidence. As Bennett has argued, the labour statutes of the fourteenth century affected women's mobility and

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<sup>85</sup> Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered," 19.

<sup>86</sup> Poos, *A Rural Society*, 217–19.

<sup>87</sup> Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered," 3.

<sup>88</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, chap. 4.

<sup>89</sup> Goldberg, 290.



independence significantly.<sup>90</sup> Legislators and governmental authorities feared the danger to the social order that working women, especially those who were unmarried and without male supervision, could pose. Therefore, compulsory service – where the servant lived in the employer’s household and under the householder’s supervision – was seen to hold the promise of better regulating them.<sup>91</sup> Because of gender differences, female workers were seen to be more vulnerable than male workers and thus were more likely to be compelled by the statutes’ regulatory framework into compulsory service.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, women were more often prohibited from casual day work and were forced to enter into year-long domestic service contracts compared to men. As a result, though women’s labour mobility increased after the plague, it was more restricted than men.<sup>93</sup> This example once again shows the gender inequality of labour conditions, which indicated that the economic status of women was always subordinate to that of men before and after the plague.

Similarly, though some scholars have argued that female landholding increased after the plague, either as heiresses or through widows’ dowry rights,<sup>94</sup> as Bardsley argued, women’s ownership of land barely changed after the Black Death in the fourteenth century, and daughters received even less, as women struggled to compete in an era of severe labour shortages.<sup>95</sup> Firstly, women only inherited in the absence of male heirs. Sometimes they could not even be heirs. Under the Act of Westminster of 1285, those eager to limit the influence of female inheritance on the descent of the land had a tool to ensure that land could only be inherited by males through

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<sup>90</sup> Bardsley, “Women’s Work Reconsidered,” 47.

<sup>91</sup> Judith M. Bennett, “Compulsory Service in Late Medieval England,” *Past and Present* 209, no. 1 (2010): 36–38.

<sup>92</sup> Bennett, 31.

<sup>93</sup> Humphries and Weisdorf, “The Wages of Women in England,” 422.

<sup>94</sup> Rigby, “Introduction,” 16.

<sup>95</sup> Bardsley, “Peasant Women,” 1.

the entail.<sup>96</sup> In fact, nephews, uncles, and other male kin rather than daughters benefited from increased mortality during the plague. Secondly, even if women inherited land, their land holdings were usually of lesser value than those of men, both before and after the plague.<sup>97</sup> The difficulty in hiring labourers after the plague was the main reason for women giving up inheritance or the courts choosing male tenants. However, the gender hierarchy in the land market — a structure of gendered landholding as primarily male — was the main cause.<sup>98</sup> Women's participation in land management was not designed into the landholding system, so female heirs suffered restrictions. This showed the gender hierarchy was consistent in the land market before and after the plague.

Therefore, women's economic status essentially did not rise with their labour value or with the increased availability of land. Though the "Golden Age" of female employment in some situations heightened women's economic independence, this was not a generalized effect, nor did it lead to an increase in political power or a change in the patriarchal hierarchy in households and society. Compared to men, women always suffered pressure of gender inequality. In the land and labour markets, women's economic activities were seen as secondary to those of men.<sup>99</sup> In households, their control of resources was often subordinated to men. As Bennett contended, women's economic status was more confined by patriarchal structures than demographic change.<sup>100</sup> Women were often identified by their marital status, while men were usually identified by their occupation such as a merchant.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, women did get economic

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<sup>96</sup> Bruce M. S. Campbell, "The Land," in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 198.

<sup>97</sup> Bardsley, "Peasant Women," 305.

<sup>98</sup> Bardsley, 320.

<sup>99</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 7.

<sup>100</sup> Bennett, "History Matters."

<sup>101</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 7.

benefits from the labour shortage in the “Golden Age”, but those changes have been overestimated.

What’s more, scholars working in this field generally agree that any “Golden Age” that occurred was short in duration rather than a structural shift in medieval English society. In the later fifteenth century, employers normally no longer sought unskilled female workers to substitute for male labour. Women were pushed out of the skilled labour market. For example, they no longer signed up for apprenticeships in London to learn craft skills. They were barred from apprenticeships. Some guilds even prohibited the wives and daughters of skilled craftsmen from working in the craft themselves. Women continued to work, but mostly in informal and dependent positions, not as apprentices.<sup>102</sup> As a result, as we will see in chapter 3, by the later fifteenth century women’s labour opportunities were limited.

### *Women’s Marital freedom*

Thus, a significant debate regarding late medieval socioeconomic arrangements in England is whether the post-Black Death period should be labeled a “Golden Age” for labourers, including working women. Another aspect of this debate is the effect of these economic transitions on marriage choices: did women’s marital freedom increase, contributing to the late and fewer marriages pattern, or did women marry in fewer numbers because they had fewer options?<sup>103</sup> Even before the debate on the “Golden Age,” Michael Sheehan in 1971 argued that women’s marriage choices were “astonishingly individualistic” in the diocese of Ely in the late fourteenth century. People, both men and women, could choose their marital partners independently without interference from parents and lords, he argued. Sheehan did not connect

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<sup>102</sup> Barron, “The ‘Golden Age’ of Women,” 48.

<sup>103</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*; Barron, “The ‘Golden Age’ of Women.”

this with the Northwest European Marriage Pattern or economic issues, but rather with the nature of the medieval canon law of marriage, which gave to the man and woman sole choice in marriage.<sup>104</sup> After Sheehan, Alan Macfarlane noticed the relationship between freedom of marriage and economic development. Macfarlane claimed that “the Malthusian marriage system” (fluctuating marriage age, free choice of love partners, independent nuclear household, and goal of individual satisfaction) was the key to linking English fertility rates with economic conditions. As a constant in English society since at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Macfarlane argued it contributed to the capitalist economic development of England.<sup>105</sup> Neither Sheehan nor Macfarlane really addressed the question of how individualism fit into the specifics of the post-Black Death economic situation, though their ideas did conform to Hajnal’s Northwestern European Marriage Pattern.<sup>106</sup>

Historians especially who hold in whole or in part to the “Golden Age” theory for the period around 1400 have tied those arguments, in ways similar to Sheehan and Macfarlane, to increased individualism in marriage choice. Since women in those decades, they argue, had greater chances to find work, earn wages, and enjoy some economic freedom, they also could opt to marry more independently or not marry at all.<sup>107</sup> One aspect of this was that they could save money for dowries by themselves. When women no longer depended entirely on men and could bring in dowries to contribute to the establishment of new households, they enjoyed greater independence in making marriage choices. Poor women who had not been eligible to marry

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<sup>104</sup> Michael M. Sheehan, “The Formation and Stability of Marriage in Fourteenth-Century England: Evidence of an Ely Register,” in *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*, ed. James Farge (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 38–76. This essay was originally published in 1971.

<sup>105</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>106</sup> Hajnal, “European Marriage Patterns in Perspective.”

<sup>107</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*.

before had more opportunities to earn dowries so they could find marital partners more easily. Those who did not want to get married at a young age could marry late or choose not to marry at all.

Firstly, better labour conditions gave both men and women more chances to marry. The financial threshold for marriage never changed: English marriage customs had long emphasized neolocality, that married couples had to live in an independent household rather than with parents or other relatives. Thus, marriage meant the necessity to possess the material foundation for the establishment of a new household, something to which both husbands and wives were expected to contribute. Men needed to offer land or property and the ability to earn a living through their occupation or landholding; and women needed to bring a dowry or marriage portion.<sup>108</sup> However, because the pandemic resulted in more land becoming available and more working opportunities, survivors had more chances to obtain wealth and get married. In some cases, the death toll meant that people inherited property that could be the basis of a new household.<sup>109</sup> Secondly, due to the labour shortage after the plague, people had more opportunities to earn money to access properties or dowry for themselves.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, people after the plague became more marriageable.

Secondly, scholars who hold with the “Golden Age” model argue that in particular women had more chances to choose their marital partners. The rise of women’s economic independence gave them greater options. After accumulating wealth, women could raise their demands to their marital partners and become less reliant on others in making their marriage

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<sup>108</sup> Bennett, “Wretched Girls,” 332.

<sup>109</sup> Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “Plague and Family Life,” in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 141; Bennett, “Wretched Girls,” 333.

<sup>110</sup> Bolton, “‘The World Upside Down’,” 72.

choices. For instance, court records show that women paid their own fees for *merchet*, the fee levied by manorial lords when a woman serf married a man outside her manor; it had traditionally been paid by her father but after the Black Death was increasingly paid by the bride herself.<sup>111</sup> This meant bondwomen could marry without their parents' support. In addition, increased migration of women to enter into service created more opportunities to meet potential husbands as they went about their work. They could thus make marriage choices independently without parental supervision. Therefore, women's marital freedom increased with labour mobility.

Thirdly, working women could choose to marry late or stay single. In the Middle Ages, marriage was an expectation for laypeople; as one of the central cultural institutions of later medieval society, marriage represented a form of social adulthood.<sup>112</sup> Marriage was crucial for couples to legitimately engage in sexual relations and establish a standard English household.<sup>113</sup> A man needed a wife's labour to run the household, and a woman also needed to access her husband's land, wages, or income through marriage.<sup>114</sup> Economic transactions motivated people to get married. However, when women could support themselves without men's income, they could delay marriage or stay single. The most obvious case of women with the economic capacity to remain unmarried were widows who had inherited substantial land or goods from their deceased husbands. Unlike feudal custom which restricted widows' access to their landholder husbands' property to forty days, urban custom (which historians first observed in London) allowed widows to retain at least one third of the property of her husband for life unless she remarried. If she chose not to marry, she could in some cases run the family business until

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<sup>111</sup> Keen, *English society*, 46.

<sup>112</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 24.

<sup>113</sup> Goldberg, 27.

<sup>114</sup> Bennett, "Wretched Girls," 326.

her death.<sup>115</sup> Therefore, remaining single would be a good option for many widows. For unmarried women, they could also choose to stay single if they could earn enough savings to support their lives, marrying only if they chose to do so, perhaps at a later age.

This optimistic view of women's freedom of marital choice in the post-Black Death era is, unsurprisingly, challenged by those who have questioned the "Golden Age" model. If women's economic benefits in the years around 1400 were less obvious than some have argued, so also were their marriage options. In addition, as scholars have pointed out, marriage was not simply about economic clout: there were also social restrictions for women to make independent marital choices. "Ungoverned women" – those who were independent and single – were seen as troublemakers.<sup>116</sup> A widow's celibacy or her remarriage might not be her choice to make: lords sometimes exerted pressure on rural widows to remarry because they preferred male tenants, and gentlemen's widows were equally pressured by their families to remarry.<sup>117</sup> Artisans' widows might have theoretically been permitted to continue to operate their dead husbands' workshops, but depending on the trade it could be very difficult for them to continue alone. They were often pressured by guild and community to marry again; sometimes they married their own apprentices in order to keep a semblance of control over their previous husband's property, as marrying outside the guild would mean the loss of that property.<sup>118</sup> Therefore, it was sometimes difficult for widows to keep single. The same held true for heiresses, perhaps even more obviously, especially if the inheritance was substantial. Once a woman had inherited substantive wealth, both her relatives and superiors, perhaps even the king, would want to control her marriage.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Caroline M. Barron, "Medieval London: Collected Papers of Caroline M. Barron," 43.

<sup>116</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, 288. Bennett and Froide, *Singlewomen*, 15–21.

<sup>117</sup> Goldberg, *Women in England*, 21.

<sup>118</sup> Goldberg, 20.

<sup>119</sup> Mate, *Daughters, Wives, and Widows*, 21–25.

Compared to wealthy women, working-class women, especially those who live away from their parents' homes in towns and cities, comparatively gained more marital freedom, because the financial stakes of their marriages were so much lower. However, even though substantial numbers of women – perhaps as much as 25 per cent – remained unmarried, they were nonetheless often seen as social outliers.<sup>120</sup> Social norms tried to push women to marry as it more securely inserted them into the patriarchal hierarchy of the household and society. In the later fifteenth century, as women's job opportunities were squeezed by the male workforce, they were forced to return to a dependent position in marriage, as we will see in chapter 3.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Bennett and Froide, *Singlewomen*, chap. 3.

<sup>121</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, 7.



### Chapter 3: Women's Labour Conditions and Marital Choices at the end of the Fifteenth Century

As I outlined in Chapter 2, the relative economic value of labour, including women's, increased in the late fourteenth century due to labour shortages, but unequal pay for male and female workers and the gendered division of labour limited women's economic independence. By the end of the fifteenth century, economic stagnation led to fewer job opportunities, guilds strengthened the exclusion of women, and untrained women were squeezed out of the labour market in economic restructuring.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, women's economic independence decreased, and they had to be more dependent on marriage for their livelihood. On the one hand, women more and more became economically dependent on husbands, because of a decrease in the availability of work opportunities for women. And on the other hand, their poverty and the imbalanced sex ratios in towns and cities made it sometimes difficult for women to find husbands. Therefore, the marriage pattern in this period continued to maintain the characteristics of late marriage and few marriages. Additionally, women who lost their economic independence were more reliant on family for dowries for marriage, and society during this period placed greater emphasis on gender hierarchy and control over women. As a result, women's marital choices were affected more than before by parents and relatives, employers, and other advisors.<sup>2</sup> Overall, patriarchy in the economic and cultural fields jointly restricted women's marital freedom.

First, while women's ownership in the land market remained unchanged, they were

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<sup>1</sup> Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage*. P. J. P Goldberg, "Women," in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, chap. 3.

marginalized in the labour market with fewer labour opportunities and worse labour conditions.<sup>3</sup> Few women could find work in formal occupations, leaving domestic service the only option. Records in the Consistory Database for the 1480s and 1490s show very few occupations other than “servant” for working women. As mentioned before, being a servant was a stage in the “life cycle” of an unmarried individual; therefore, servanthood was different from a formal occupation. In other ways also women’s labour conditions became worse. For example, although women’s wages continued to rise in the 1500s, they remained below those of men and the gender gap was wider than it had been in the fourteenth century.<sup>4</sup> There were many reasons for the worsening labour conditions. There was a general decline in employment and wages caused by economic stagnation and the abundance of male labour.<sup>5</sup> However, the discrimination and exclusion of women in the economic field through the operations of patriarchy was more significant. Increasingly through the fifteenth century women were excluded from formal occupational training (such as through artisanal guilds) and from independent commercial participation, more and more restricted by urban governments to male citizens or burgesses.

This chapter will consider these patterns through testimony offered in marital litigation during the 1480s and 1490s. These witness statements survive from the London Consistory Court, the main church court of the diocese of London, an ecclesiastical jurisdiction that included the medieval city of London itself and its surrounding rural areas in Essex, Middlesex, and parts of Hertfordshire.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have used these and similar sources to study women’s marriage and labour in both urban and rural areas. As we saw in the introduction, these cases came to the church courts because under canon law, the church had jurisdiction over disputes concerning

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<sup>3</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 41–42.

<sup>4</sup> Humphries and Weisdorf, “The Wages of Women,” 423–24.

<sup>5</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 214.

<sup>6</sup> “About the Consistory,” *Consistory Database*, <https://consistory.org/the-consistory/#back3>.

marriage, a sacrament.<sup>7</sup> Testimonies of the London Consistory Court offered records of disputes over marriage formation — unlike the modern context, where marriage litigation mainly deals with divorce, medieval marriage cases mainly involved marriage contracts, or the entry into a marriage. This is because the canon law of the Middle Ages stipulated that a legitimate marriage could not be dissolved, so there was no concept of modern divorce.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, making a marriage was relatively free and simple. As soon as two individuals exchange consent, that constituted a contract or unbreakable marriage bond.<sup>9</sup> As marriages were easy to make, difficult legal situations sometimes arose, such as multiple marriages. Therefore, people went to court to sue to force the other party to fulfill a marriage contract, or to deny that the agreement had taken place. In this process, we can see details about how men and women chose and decided on partners, their working environments, economic considerations, and the interference of family on individual marital choices. When people sued one another over marriage issues, witnesses were produced to offer evidence to support or refute a party's contentions. Therefore, these sources offer realistic (if not necessarily true) stories about the circumstances surrounding a marriage.

As the testimonies indicate, women often worked as domestic servants, which (as we have seen) was often a life stage before marriage.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, women's marriage choices were often influenced by family consent, and sometimes also affected by employers' consent. Thirdly, women's social status was identified by their marital status. Widows had more autonomy than single women, but single women had more autonomy than married women. Nonetheless, widows were also often restricted in making independent marriage choices. Therefore, the picture from

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<sup>7</sup> P. J. P. Goldberg, "Gender and Matrimonial Litigation in the Church Courts in the Later Middle Ages: The Evidence of the Court of York," *Gender & History* 19, no. 1 (April 2007): 43–59.

<sup>8</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–47.

<sup>10</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, chap. 4.

the Consistory court testimony suggests that women's marital freedom was restricted in the late fifteenth century.

The details of personal lives of non-elite rural and urban people these sources reveal is rare. As L. R. Poos has argued, as most ordinary medieval people were illiterate, there are few surviving texts or documents in which they narrate their lives.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, these sources do not represent all people who lived in the diocese of London and thus do not describe the broad labour and marriage patterns of all classes. For instance, few members of the gentry or higher used this court, because they had more private ways to deal with marriage disputations, such as recourse to the bishop's authority in person rather than the courts.<sup>12</sup> The poorest people in the diocese are also largely missing from the court's records, mostly because the poor were not able to afford to go to court, for it took money to launch a marriage case.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the source only showed marriage and economic lives of ordinary people, neither very poor nor rich. This suits the focus of this thesis in any case, which is about ordinary working women. What's more, testimonies of individual cases do not reveal general marriage rates, ages of the marrying parties, or fertility patterns. Moreover, evidence about labour situations is usually circumstantial rather than the main focus of testimony. Therefore, this chapter will also use other sources, such as P. J. P. Goldberg's *Women in England c. 1275–1525: Documentary Sources* as a supplement.

This chapter consists of three sections. The first part will examine women's worsening labour conditions and the decline of their economic independence in the later fifteenth century. The second part will focus on women's restricted freedom of marriage. The third section discusses the characteristics of marriage in the late fifteenth century, especially the pattern of late

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<sup>11</sup> L. R. Poos, *A Rural Society*, 146.

<sup>12</sup> Bronach C. Kane, *Popular Memory and Gender in Medieval England: Men, Women and Testimony in the Church Courts, c. 1200-1500* (Boydell & Brewer, 2019), 26.

<sup>13</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 118–19.

and fewer marriages.

### *Worse Labour conditions*

According to the Consistory court testimony and other sources, it was difficult for late fifteenth-century women in London and Essex to find jobs other than servant work. Firstly, cases in the Consistory court showed that almost all working women laboured as servants in masters' houses, lacking more specific occupations. As discussed in chapter 2, most adolescents in later medieval England worked in "life-cycle service"<sup>14</sup> in the life stage before marriage and adulthood. Servants often began their positions around the age of 14, so their employers acted as parent-like figures. As householders, masters had the duty and responsibility to supervise servants in their homes, including overseeing their behaviour. In their years as servants, these adolescents had opportunities to meet potential marital partners, and employers sometimes were deeply involved in their servants' marital choices.<sup>15</sup> Masters and mistresses also taught servants how to run a household for their future marriage. For example, female servants usually learned to do housework and care for children.

The London Consistory court records include seven specific cases describing servants' lives and marriages: Agnes Whitingdom c. John Ely; Alice Billingham c John (or Thomas) Wellis; Robert Philipson c Joan Corney; Richard Cressy c. Alice Scrace; John Jenyn c Alice Seton and John Grose; Henry Kyrkeby c. Eleanor Roberts; and Christian Hilles c. Robert Padley.

For example, in the case of Agnes Whitingdom c. John Ely in January 1487, Agnes Whitingdom sued John Ely to enforce the marriage contract she alleged they made in September

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<sup>14</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, chap. 4.

<sup>15</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 84–86.

1486.<sup>16</sup> This case offers interesting details about dowries, marriage gifts, and servant work and its relationship to marriage and wifely status. Ely claimed he had not contracted marriage with Whittingdon, although they had some discussions about it. He said that he listed a specific minimum dowry he would need a wife to bring with her into marriage but that when she was unable to provide it, he did not pursue the marriage. Agnes Whittingdon's witnesses, on the other hand, testified that they saw an agreement between Ely and Whittingdon in which he took her as his future wife, gave her gifts, bought her wedding clothes, and complained to her employer about her menial laundry duties. According to the testimony of witness Joan Robert, wife of cheesemonger John Robert:

A little before the last feast of All Hallows [1 Nov.]. John, sitting in this witness's dwelling-house, saw Agnes with bare legs carrying clothes to wash in the Thames, that is a bowk [pail or bucket], and as if troubled by this said that Agnes's master should get himself another servant to do this business because she was his wife and he did not want her through these labours to debilitate herself or fall ill and so on.

The female servant Agnes did laundry for her master. The work was menial and tough, so the man John was reluctant to let his future wife continue to do this job. Another witness John Cok, linen draper, testified:

He also heard John saying that he did not wish Agnes to carry the bowks to the Thames and he would rather pay someone else to do the carrying than have her do it. And if Agnes's master dismissed her from his service because she would not carry clothes to the Thames for washing, John would take her in and pay for her meals until the time that the marriage was celebrated between them.

This indicates the husband's duty to support his (future) wife financially. It also showed evidence about different kinds of labour, status, and respectability. Laundry was menial work

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<sup>16</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Agnes Whittingdon c. John Ely," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/03/03/agnes-whittingdon-c-john-ely/>.

which connected with the lowest status.<sup>17</sup> Only poor women would go to men's homes or places of residence to take their clothes to wash. Therefore, it sometimes was associated with sex work, and female servants usually felt unpleasant about doing laundry.

As this case indicates, marriage meant the end of servanthood. They learned good manners in strangers' household and saved money for their future marriage.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, servanthood was different from a formal occupation. Though most women worked as servants, cases showed that they rarely had formal job positions.

Only one case showed a particular occupation for a woman, Alice Billingham c John (or Thomas) Wellis, 1486 to 1488, in which Alice Billingham sued John Wellis to complete their marriage contract.<sup>19</sup> This case offers rather rare evidence of an independent businesswoman. Beatrice Thomson, one of the witnesses, was a married woman who appeared to run an inn. At the same time, her husband Richard Thomson worked as a skinner (or furrier). Their businesses were apparently separate; Beatrice had likely inherited the inn from a previous husband. Beatrice was Alice's mistress or employer and was very actively involved in their marriage process. She was probably a strong woman with an independent personality. But her independence as a married woman was unusual at the time, as married women were usually depended on their husbands in financial matters, as we will see below.

Aside from this case, the Consistory records show no occupations for women other than as servants. This suggests the reduction of female employment in labour market in comparison to the early fifteenth century. When there was sufficient male labour in the market, the female

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<sup>17</sup> Carole Rawcliffe, "A Marginal Occupation? The Medieval Laundress and Her Work," *Gender & History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 147–69.

<sup>18</sup> Goldberg, *Women in England*, 87.

<sup>19</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Alice Billingham c John (or Thomas) Wellis," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/02/11/billingham-c-wellis/>.

labour that was previously employed as a substitute was squeezed out.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the transformation of economic structures in England from the late medieval period to the early modern period also led to the increasing exclusion of women from paid employment; though women sometimes worked in the lower-levels of textile manufacture, that work was casualized and precarious.<sup>21</sup> Women had few opportunities to acquire occupational skills (most apprenticeships were barred to them) and once they married their work was always secondary to that of the head of the household, at best part-time, performed in the gaps between the household tasks that were seen as their main duties.<sup>22</sup> Craft guilds increasingly restricted women's access: In 1448, for instance, the Shrewsbury weavers rigorously restricted widows from continuing trading and in 1453, Coventry weavers restricted a master to permit his wife or daughter to weave in the broad loom because it was "against all good order and honesty".<sup>23</sup> These restrictions that made urban artisanal and mercantile occupations open only to men became widespread over the fifteenth century; as a result, women had few opportunities for apprenticeships or other means of gaining occupational skills or the opportunities to practise them.<sup>24</sup> At best, they were more seen as secondary workers assisting men (as for instance wives working in aspects of their husbands' business).<sup>25</sup>

Women's independent participation in commercial activities was also increasingly limited.<sup>26</sup> Though women had often been associated with the sale of food and drink, as an extension of their domestic duties, as these economic sectors became more commercialized over

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<sup>20</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> McIntosh, 140, 211. 237.

<sup>22</sup> McIntosh, 37; Goldberg, *Women in England*, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 214–15.

<sup>24</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 37; Goldberg, *Women in England*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered," 22–23.

<sup>26</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 41.



the fifteenth century, women's work came to be more concentrated at the bottom levels.<sup>27</sup> The best example of this is brewing, a previously woman-dominated industry deprived of their dominant positions by men after the industry developed and became more profitable.<sup>28</sup> According to Judith Bennett, brewsters (women brewers), who had dominated the production of ale for centuries, were at a disadvantage compared to men as both ale and especially beer-brewing (imported from the continent in the fifteenth century) became larger-scale enterprises. Women were much less able to raise capital to invest in technology, to develop new markets in England and abroad, and to deal with government interference in the industry; in addition, in many circumstances women were explicitly (rather than just implicitly) excluded by the barring of non-guild members from the sale of ale and beer in urban markets. As a result, women who previously dominated the brewing market became at best second-tier in male-dominated organizations.<sup>29</sup> As unskilled secondary workers, women's work was more concentrated at the bottom—low status, low pay. Therefore, fifteenth-century women were more marginalized in the labour market, they rarely had formal occupations, and they suffered a widening gender wage gap. As a consequence, their economic independence to support themselves was reduced.<sup>30</sup> Skills acquisition and trading rights became more and more confined to men, meaning that women were further marginalized and had increasing difficulty accessing recognized occupations.

Therefore, more women could only find service work, which was labour, but not a formal occupation.<sup>31</sup> This may explain why the labour mobility of female servants did not change much, but their wages fell. Because the supply exceeded demand, the labour condition of servant work

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<sup>27</sup> McIntosh, 212, 252.

<sup>28</sup> McIntosh, 30.

<sup>29</sup> Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 145.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett, 145.

<sup>31</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 41, 59.

worsened. Though women of the later fifteenth century may have been culturally more restricted in mobility than they had been before, economically they had to migrate to towns due to the stagnation in rural areas.<sup>32</sup> As mentioned above, many industries came to use more complex manufacturing processes, especially piecework. They were more concentrated in towns and cities. Similarly, domestic service positions were also more available in urban areas. Labour opportunities in the countryside were more available for men than for women. The result was that excess female rural labour was absorbed by the urban areas.<sup>33</sup> Although some rural women stayed with their parents until marriage, there were also many poor girls who would not inherit property and had to move to urban areas to earn a dowry, or just to earn a living. While somewhat higher-status women might move to domestic service positions in more elite households to meet prospective husbands, these poor girls moved to survive.<sup>34</sup>

We see some examples of women moving for employment in the London Consistory cases, demonstrating some of these different motivations for young women of different socio-economic station. In the case Henry Kyrkeby c. Eleanor Roberts, discussed in the introduction, Eleanor was a young female servant who moved from one position to another to seek better labour conditions.<sup>35</sup> The witness John Whitypoll reported that one evening in February 1488, Eleanor was escorted to his house in rural Essex by one of his neighbours. He asked her why she was coming to his door, and

She responded that that same day she had come from the parish of Hornchurch to seek service, because her master at Hornchurch did not give her an appropriate wage and, since she was not bound with him in any agreement, she came to look

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<sup>32</sup> P.J.P Goldberg, “Migration, Youth and Gender in Later Medieval England,” ed. F. Riddy and P. J. P Goldberg, *Youth in the Middle Ages*, 2004, 85–99.

<sup>33</sup> Goldberg, *Woman is a worthy wight*, 108–22.

<sup>34</sup> Goldberg, 111.

<sup>35</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, “Henry Kyrkeby c. Eleanor Roberts,” *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/01/27/kyrkeby-c-roberts/>.

for a better position.

Whitypoll took her on, and she became his servant.

In another case, Richard Cressy c. Alice Scrace, a young woman moved to London to become a servant.<sup>36</sup> Alice was of a higher station than Eleanor: she had an inheritance, and both her brother and her intended husband were lawyers. Becoming a servant offered opportunities for higher-status women to find husbands, so Alice went to someone else's house to be a servant. Though technically Richard sued Alice to claim her as his wife, she did not oppose his suit; it was Alice's brother and her employer who opposed their marriage. Richard and Alice had first connected in Sussex in the early 1480s at her family's home, when Richard came to visit her brother. Six years later, Alice's father had died, and she had moved to London to work as a servant in the house of John Scot. There she met Richard Cressy again. At first, she simply asked Cressy for help in securing her inheritance, which her brother refused to hand over to her, but soon their relationship turned into a serious courtship. They exchanged various gifts with one another through several intermediaries in London. In this story, it was her moving to London that allowed the two to meet again and potentially develop a relationship; for a rural woman of some property, London offered many more potential marriage partners than the countryside. Both cases reveal the mobility of working women in finding jobs, across a significant social spectrum.

However, though women could still move to look for better labour conditions in the late fifteenth century, the conditions of servant work generally became worse. As seen above, economic stagnation in the late fifteenth century drove more people from rural areas to towns in search of work opportunities. Sex ratios varied by region. London had a high number of

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<sup>36</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Richard Cressy c. Alice Scrace," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/01/30/cressy-c-scrace/>.

apprentices (who were young men servants) in comparison to other cities, but in most urban settlements, more women than men moved to urban areas in search of work.<sup>37</sup> Though there were few other opportunities for women other than domestic service and the (poorly remunerated) piecework, service positions were less and less available.<sup>38</sup> As a result of urbanization, while the upper classes tended to have larger households and required more servants, the number of artisans and farmers who could hire servants decreased.<sup>39</sup> This caused an oversupply in the servant market, especially for female servants; the alternative of working independently as a piece worker in the garment industry or in sex work was available, but less attractive and less respectable. It is reasonable to infer that the treatment of female servants became worse, corresponding with the evidence that women's labour conditions generally fell in the 1500s. According to wage tables, women's wages continued to rise through the 1500s, but the gender gap increased in comparison to the fourteenth century.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, for women in the late fifteenth century, not only were jobs hard to find, but in real terms wages also declined. As a result, it was more difficult for them to support themselves.

Therefore, in the late fifteenth century, women's economic independence was reduced. Due to fewer labour opportunities and worse labour conditions, women who were fortunate to find work usually had to accept poor treatment, which was not enough to support themselves and earn a proper dowry. Those who were unable to find work may have been able to stay at home with their parents, but many others had to move into the lower-status and less respectable labour zones, which reduced their marriage choices. Unable to find work, or not being paid enough to support themselves, women needed financial support of a husband more than ever – and

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<sup>37</sup> Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, chap. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Goldberg, 164.

<sup>39</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 59, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Humphries and Weisdorf, "The Wages of Women," 423–24.

certainly this was the only respectable option. Their motivation to marry increased. However, women could not earn enough dowries on their own, so they were forced to rely more on family support when it was available. That in turn meant that their families had greater power to interfere with their marriage choices. This resulted in the restriction of women's freedom of marriage in the late fifteenth century, which will be explained in the next section.

### *Restricted marital freedom*

In the late fifteenth century, many working women had some basic marital freedoms. They had chances to find partners in their workplace. They made financial contributions to prepare for marriage and start a new household. Female servants exchanged gifts with their prospective male partners. They also participated in discussions about the financial basis of entering into marriage. Moreover, women had marital freedom in theory: the canon law stipulated that marriage is made by the free choice of individuals.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, women should have been able to choose independently whether to marry and whom to marry. Just as in the fourteenth century, women who were in the "golden age" of employment could either marry quickly because they have earned enough dowry, or they could postpone marriage and continued to work.

However, as women's economic independence decreased in the late fifteenth century, they relied more on marriage to support their lives. They were restricted from deciding whether to marry. Many women married late or stayed unmarried, not because they could work to support themselves, but because they were too poor to marry.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, women who owned property, such as heiresses and wealthy widows, were pushed to marry to ensure that wealth remained in

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<sup>41</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Bennett, "Wretched Girls."

the hands of men. In addition, women were also restricted in choosing marital partners. Firstly, women were more dependent than men on other people in their lives in making this important decision, people who were sometimes termed in the sources as “friends.” In medieval terminology, people close to a young person with some kind of authority or governance relationship — whether parents, other relatives, employers, guardians, godparents, or other people close to them — were known as “friends.”<sup>43</sup> They were part of a community that both helped and supervised young people entering into marriage. Their involvement was sometimes financially necessary: as families needed to contribute to a dowry, for instance, family consent became more influential. Employers were also frequently involved in marriage negotiations, both because of their employment contracts but also because they had a quasi-parental role over adolescent servants. Not only would unmarried daughters receive interference with marriage choices, but remarried widows could also be pushed to marry or choose a marriage partner against her will. This could relate to the strengthening of society’s control over women during this period.<sup>44</sup> Though there were some examples in the Consistory court litigation where women chose marriage partners on their own terms, more cases indicated that family and employer’s consent were significant for women to make decisions.

The Consistory evidence shows that working women could find the ideal partners in their workplace, and they had obligations to make financial contributions to prepare for marriage and start a new household. For example, in the case *Christian Hilles c. Robert Padley*, which took place in Essex in 1489 and 1490, Christian Hilles, who delivered a baby for Robert, sued him to

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<sup>43</sup> Diana O’hara, “‘Ruled by My Friends’: Aspects of Marriage in the Diocese of Canterbury, c. 1540-1570,” *Continuity and Change* 6, no. 1 (1991): 9–41.

<sup>44</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 138.

force him to acknowledge their marriage.<sup>45</sup> Christian and Robert were two servants who worked for the same employer. In the witness John Gip's testimony, "they were servants in one and the same house and were greatly in one another's company." Their master's house and property offered space for them to court, exchange gifts and talk of marriage, and even have premarital sex. As John Gip testified, he "because ... he saw them alone together in the meadow turning the hay, fame circulated that he had impregnated her" in the summer of 1489. This case indicated that their working place offered a free space for servants to meet potential marital partners and build relationships.

In addition, Christian and Robert exchanged gifts. In his testimony, Robert admitted that "on many occasions [he] gave Christian money for the sake of the marriage between them.....He gave her a pair of shoes and a pair of gloves." Christian also gave Robert "a silk lace, a trefoil, and a lamb of God [agnus dei] made of silk ... for the sake of the marriage that was to be had between them." Though Robert repudiated the marriage by using the pregnancy as an excuse — he refused to admit that the child was his and claimed that she had broken a bargain where she would remain chaste — this case indicates that both men and women provided their own property in preparation for marriage.

Economic conditions were the threshold for both men and women to get into an ideal marriage. Men sometimes required women to offer money for their marriage. In the case of *Alice Billingham c John (or Thomas) Wellis*, Wellis allegedly said to Billingham, "it takes more to make a household than four naked thighs."<sup>46</sup> As mentioned above (or in chapter 2), when people

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<sup>45</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Christian Hilles c. Robert Padley," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/01/23/hilles-c-padley/>.

<sup>46</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Alice Billingham c John (or Thomas) Wellis," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/02/11/billingham-c-wellis/>.

got married in late medieval England, they had to establish an independent household, which cost money. Therefore, Wellis did not want to marry Alice, unless she could get more money from her friends. As the witness Beatrice Thomson testified, Wellis said to her that if Alice was able to have her “friends” agree to pay a certain amount as a dowry, “it may fortune I will marry her and thereupon I will shape mine answer.” But after the witness on Billingham’s behalf gave John “a Jemew [ring] of gilt silver or of gold”, John said thus, “commend me to her, she shall have it again.” So, John sent the gift back. He finally refused to marry Alice by using his family’s consent as an excuse, but the testimony indicates that her marriage portion was simply not big enough.

The case of Agnes Whitingdom c. John Ely more visibly shows a man’s investigation of the woman’s marriage portion.<sup>47</sup> The defendant John Ely laid out a specific dowry he required as a minimum. According to his testimony, he did not want to marry Agnes without “first knowing how much her friends were willing to give as her marriage portion.” Then, he sent someone to ask Agnes’s parents how much they would give her for marriage. Later, he said that he would marry Agnes if he could have with her five marks [£3 6s 8d]; she and her family evidently could not make that sum. The case indicates the importance of financial support from family and friends for working women to get married, due to the meager salaries of servants, which were evidently not enough for them to get into the marriage they wanted. Therefore, family and friends played a big role in servants’ marriage process. This could be a kind of restriction to women’s marital freedom.

According to the evidence of these cases, family and friends also helped both men and

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<sup>47</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, “Agnes Whitingdom c. John Ely,” *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/03/03/agnes-whitingdon-c-john-ely/>.



women determine the economic conditions of their marriage partners. Their consent sometimes was significant for women to make marriage choices. In the case of Thomas Hall and Thomas Salmon alias Miller c. Denise Pogger, for instance, which took place in Essex in 1489, two men competed to marry the rich widow.<sup>48</sup> Denise's relatives and friends wanted her to choose the richer Salmon, though she preferred to marry Hall. As the witness Thomas Danyell testified, Denise said that it was not her intention to marry Salmon, but that her son had asked the parish priest to give the banns (announcements at the church service on Sunday that the two intended to marry) without her prior knowledge. Finally, Denise was trying in vain to escape her relatives and friends' control. In this case, the widow Denise's marriage choice was influenced by family pressure. This was because the family felt they had an economic stake in her marriage. The more property a woman owned, the more her relatives tended to interfere with her marriage. Denise was a rich widow who had her own house and more property, so she was more attractive as a potential marital partner. However, though this increased the number of men interested in her, it also gave her family more motivation to attempt to control her marriage choice.

The same situation happened in another case, John Brocher c. Joan Cardif alias Peryn, which took place in Essex in 1487.<sup>49</sup> John Brocher sued the young widow to enforce a marriage contract he claimed that they had made but which she denied. Her own mother and stepfather testified against her, pushing her to marry the man. As this indicates, widows could be pushed to remarry and pass the property they had inherited from their previous husband to a new man of

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<sup>48</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Thomas Hall and Thomas Salmon alias Miller c. Denise Pogger," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/01/29/hall-and-salmon-c-pogger/>.

<sup>49</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "John Brocher c. Joan Cardif alias Peryn," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/02/22/brocher-c-cardif/>.

whom their family approved. As mentioned earlier in the chapter 2, after the Black Death, more widows took control of their wealth, but later in the fifteenth century they were under more pressure to remarry.<sup>50</sup>

The marriages of female heirs were also significantly affected by their families or guardians. In the case of Richard Cressy c. Alice Scrace, for instance, the heiress's brother opposed her marriage.<sup>51</sup> The marriage choices of heiresses were vulnerable to interference; in this case, Alice Scrace's brother refused to pass over to her the inheritance that she had been bequeathed in her father's will. A similar situation happened in another case, John Croke c. Agnes Hill. Agnes Hill's family was hostile to John Croke, for this marriage was more beneficial to the man.<sup>52</sup> Agnes was an heiress of a wealthy London merchant, but John was a younger son without many prospects, so the woman's family opposed the marriage. Though they still got married finally, it's hard to say whether this was because of the woman's insistence of her own will, or whether the man spent a lot of money in the Consistory until he won the case.<sup>53</sup> As these cases indicate, women who owned property were more likely to have interference in their marriages.<sup>54</sup> The man and his family would want to benefit from a high marriage, while the woman's family would try to avoid a marriage where the woman married down.

In contrast with higher class women, most working women mainly relied on themselves to earn a dowry. Although they might not be able to find an ideal marriage partner because they were not wealthy enough, the possibility of relatives interfering in their marriage was also

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<sup>50</sup> Goldberg, *Women in England*, 21.

<sup>51</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Richard Cressy c. Alice Scrace," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/01/30/cressy-c-scrace/>.

<sup>52</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "John Croke c. Agnes Hill," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/03/01/john-croke-c-agnes-hill/>.

<sup>53</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 119.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

reduced. However, records showed that their marriage choices were also sometimes influenced by their family's consent. Sometimes failure to gain such consent may have been used as an excuse to reject a marriage, as in the case of *Alice Billingham c John (or Thomas) Wellis* above.<sup>55</sup> According to the witness Richard Thomson's testimony, Wellis said that he was not disposed to marry unless he could first "have the consent and will of his parents", but then he added more, that "it took more to make a household than four naked thighs." He may have simply used his family's acquiescence to the marriage as a way to turn her away; or perhaps he meant that unless his family agreed, and contributed financially to the couple, he could not afford to marry. Women, especially, made reference to the necessity of parental consent. For instance, in the case of *Robert Philipson c Joan Corney*, which took place in Essex in 1489, the father's consent played a crucial role in Joan's marriage choice.<sup>56</sup> According to the witness John Ward's testimony, Joan said to Robert, "I made you promise but on my father's good will." Then, she was forced by her father to reject the marriage contract.

In Joan Corney's case, she claimed when questioned in court that she had promised to marry Robert Philipson only if both her father and her employer agreed. Many women's employers played roles, big or small, in their servants' marriages. But in *Alice Billingham c John (or Thomas) Wellis*'s case, Alice's mistress, Beatrice Thomson, claimed that she had been a major force in arranging the marriage for the two, both of whom had been servants in her house – and then un-arranged it.<sup>57</sup> As the witness Agnes Bullok testified, Beatrice said, "I have made

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<sup>55</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Alice Billingham c John (or Thomas) Wellis," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/02/11/billingham-c-wellis/>.

<sup>56</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Robert Philipson c Joan Corney," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/01/31/philipson-c-corney/>.

marriage between a young man that was my servant and her, and I shall bring it as far backward as ever I brought it forward.” Constance Stileman also testified that Beatrice had said “I have made a marriage between Alice Billingham and Thomas Wellis.” According to Beatrice’s testimony, on Alice’s behalf she gave Wellis gifts; this showed she was deeply involved in the courtship.

The reason why the employer could get involved in their servants’ private life, such as Beatrice arranging marriage for her servants, could be that they have the rights and responsibility to oversee the behaviour of their servants. As previously argued, masters acted as parents to supervise adolescent servants. Young servants lived in their house, so masters could easily trace their behaviours but also had the responsibility as masters and mistresses of the household to supervise their dependents’ actions. As the defendant John Wellis testified, he and Alice “both spoke together eight times in the home of Richard Thomson (Beatrice’s husband) and other places in the last two years.” It was easy for the master to trace the progress of the young couple’s courtship in her space. Other employers played active roles opposing a marriage, as in *Richard Cressy c. Alice Scrace*. As Alice testified, John Scot, her master, asked her whether she had contracted with Richard. She had to lie that they made contract in John Scot’s father’s storeroom instead of in her master’s house. In this way, John Scott would not be annoyed because she married Richard at John’s house without his knowledge. As this suggests, masters had rights and responsibility to know what happened in their households, so their involvement in employee’s marriage became a matter of course.

In addition, under secular law, employers could charge a man who married one of their servants for withdrawing that servant. Likewise, apprentices were generally prohibited from

marrying while in service.<sup>58</sup> This could explain the master's behavior in the case of Christian Hilles c. Robert Padley.<sup>59</sup> Christian believed that Robert's master "would not permit them to wed while this witness still had to complete the terms of his service." The fact that she got pregnant while living under his roof was a sign of his improper supervision, so the master may have arranged for her to be removed to London. In this case, the master prevented the marriage of the two, which showed the importance of his consent in servants' marriage. He could interfere with the servants' marriage if he wanted.

However, compared to family consent, the effect of the employer's consent was generally less obvious. Employees could find strategies to avoid the employer's involvement, such as finding another place to make a marriage contract, or making connections surreptitiously by deceiving their master, as in the case of Richard Cressy c. Alice Scrace indicated.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, employers' interference could be reduced by employees' scheming.

Therefore, working women's freedom to make marriage choices was restricted by family and employers' consent and involvement. Though in canon law, individuals had rights to make a marriage contract by themselves, their freedom of making marriage choices was restricted compared to the fourteenth century. This was due to the social-economic stagnation and transition in the late fifteenth century.<sup>61</sup> Firstly, the decrease of women's economic independence led to decline in marital independence. The previous chapter and these two sections have described their correlation in detail. In general, fifteenth-century women had a harder time finding jobs sufficient to support themselves, and so had a greater need to marry. It was also

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<sup>58</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 84.

<sup>59</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Christian Hilles c. Robert Padley," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/01/23/hilles-c-padley/>.

<sup>60</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Richard Cressy c. Alice Scrace," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/01/30/cressy-c-scrace/>.

<sup>61</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 8.

more difficult for them to independently earn all the dowry due to poorer working conditions, so they were more dependent on the financial support of the family to get married. Therefore, the family's consent in marriage became more important. Employer's consent sometimes was influential, for employees such as servants were dependent on their masters in living and working.

Secondly, fifteenth-century society put more emphasis on gender hierarchy and strengthened control over women.<sup>62</sup> Gender inequality in the labour market and society was consistent even in the "golden age" of female employment in the fourteenth century. Trivial evidence in Consistory court testimonies at the end of the fifteenth century underscored this point. Women, for instance, were always identified by their marital status or other relation to a man. For example, in the case of Alice Billingham c. John (or Thomas) Wellis, the witness Beatrice Thomson was recorded as the wife of Richard Thomson. Although she was an independent businesswoman who operated an inn, it was her marital status, not her occupation, that identified her in the records. Even the term "servant" indicated that the woman was dependent on and under the governance of a household head more than it indicated her occupation. This was not simply a feature of ecclesiastical court documents but standard in all records of this period. This showed that the social status of women was closely connected to their marital status. What's more, the cases above showed that when women's marital choices were affected, the opinions of male relatives more than female relatives, fathers rather than mothers, were more decisive. Men had more political and legal acumen due to greater participation in public life, so they had more chances to use their connections and skills in these areas to involve their daughter's marriage choices.<sup>63</sup> Male household heads also had more

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<sup>62</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 256–57.

<sup>63</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 95.

authority than their wives to arrange family economic transactions in their children's marriages, explaining why they took the leading role.

In addition, it was mentioned earlier that women who had property were pushed to marry. That was first because the male-dominated society wanted wealth in the hands of male households. The reason was that by the English legal doctrine of coverture, any property a woman brought into a marriage became the property of her husband; married women owned nothing but their "paraphernalia," their clothes and other personal items. The case of *Ann Styward c. Richard Styward* indicated that Richard was the second husband of Ann. Not only did he domestically abuse his wife, but he also took much of the property left by her ex-husband Richard Alpe.<sup>64</sup> As he pointed out, his inheritance of Richard Alpe's estate was his legal right as a husband. Though married women contributed to family economy, they were dependent on their husbands, so they did not have the same economic independence as widows and unmarried women.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, the patriarchal society feared uncontrolled women would cause problems such as disorder and immorality.<sup>66</sup> Widows' autonomy could affect male-dominated social structures; unmarried women could fall into immoral practices such as prostitution.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, fifteenth-century society pushed women back into marriage and family — back under the control of men. The upper echelons of society tightened their grip on women. One prominent example was the poem "How the Goodwife Taught her daughter," written in the early fifteenth century.<sup>68</sup> The book emphasizes that the virtues of women of moderation and honor, especially the latter. And

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<sup>64</sup> See for all quotations following from this case, "Ann Styward c. Richard Styward," *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/02/07/styward-c-styward/>

<sup>65</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 20, 139.

<sup>66</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 41.

<sup>67</sup> Goldberg, *Women in England*, 39.

<sup>68</sup> Goldberg, 97–103.

women's honor lies in chastity, obedience, restraint of speech and humility. "Have moderation and humility, as I have taught you. And whatever man shall wed you, then he is not deceived. Better were a child unborn than untutored of wise instruction."<sup>69</sup> This undoubtedly conveyed the value of women's subordination to men; as this thinking continued, women were brought more and more under control during the late fifteenth century into the early modern era.<sup>70</sup> They were pressured to marry, to marry at a younger age, and were more controlled in making marriage choices.

As a result, women's marital freedom was restricted due to the strength of patriarchy in society. As mentioned above, that's also an important reason for the decrease of women's economic independence. In addition to transitions in the labour market and economic structure, the patriarchy of the entire economic system, which was the intentional or unintentional exclusion of women by men, was an important reason for the marginalization of working women. Therefore, patriarchy in the economic and cultural spheres combined to restrict women's economic independence and marital freedom.

Fifteenth-century women had both pressures and motivation to marry, but many of them were too poor to marry, or married late. Therefore, compared to the fourteenth century, the marriage pattern at this time did not change a lot, continuing to follow the Northwestern European Marriage pattern with fewer and later marriages. In London and Essex, those who married did so on average first in their mid-twenties to a partner of about the same age, more or less by their own choice.<sup>71</sup> But many people remained unmarried. For instance, in 1504 in Littlebury, Essex, a last will was written by a "senglywomen", then in 1510, another by a

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<sup>69</sup> Goldberg, 103.

<sup>70</sup> Goldberg, 8–9.

<sup>71</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, 6.



“synglman.”<sup>72</sup> Remaining unmarried had become more common and in a sense the identity institutionalized.

Evidence from witnesses in the Consistory court suggests similar patterns. No witnesses who were married, either men or women, were under 23, while women servants (who, as they lived with their employers, were by definition unmarried) were sometimes older than that. For example, in the case of John Jenyn c Alice Seton and John Grose, the witness Alice Holton was a female servant in London. She was twenty-five years old and unmarried.<sup>73</sup> It was also possible for wives to be older than husbands: in the case of Alice Billingham c John (or Thomas) Wellis, Richard Thomson was 31, while his wife Beatrice Thomson was around 34-35.<sup>74</sup> In the case of Agnes Whitingdom c. John Ely, John Robert was 40, and his wife Joan Robert was 48.<sup>75</sup> We may suspect that young women from more elite families with substantial marriage portions were marrying younger, as did gentry women. For example, it seems likely that Agnes Hill, orphan and heiress of a wealthy merchant, was relatively young when she and John Croke began to discuss marriage; they did marry but only four years later, perhaps when she came of age (which could have been as late as age 25).<sup>76</sup>

Due to urbanization, opposite sex ratios of countryside and city created problems for finding spouses. As previously noted, urban areas had more women than men while rural areas had more men than women, which posed a challenge in finding suitable marriage partners. Rural

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<sup>72</sup> Poos, *A Rural Society*, 157.

<sup>73</sup> “John Jenyn c. Alice Seton and John Grose,” *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/01/28/jenyn-c-seton-and-grose/>.

<sup>74</sup> “Alice Billingham c. John (or Thomas) Wellis,” *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/02/11/billingham-c-wellis/>.

<sup>75</sup> “Agnes Whitingdom c. John Ely,” *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/03/03/agnes-whitingdon-c-john-ely/>.

<sup>76</sup> “John Croke c. Agnes Hill,” *Consistory Database*, Ed. Shannon McSheffrey, <https://consistory.org/2022/03/01/john-croke-c-agnes-hill/>.

poor, such as landless people, had few chances to marry.<sup>77</sup> The same would have been true of the urban poor. In migrating to towns, rural landless men may have become vagrants and women may have engaged in prostitution. They remained unmarried not because they preferred to, but because they were not able to marry. Considering the economic stagnation during this period, there must have been many people remaining unmarried because of poverty.

Therefore, the marriage pattern in the late fifteenth century still generally followed the Northwestern European Pattern. However, the reasons for late and fewer marriages were like the twelfth and thirteenth century, and different from modern times. In recent years in many developed countries, women marry late because they are working more and delay marriage. But before industrialization, people married late usually because they were poor. Therefore, with less economic freedom, women experienced less marital freedom. Unable to find work, or earn enough to support themselves, fifteenth-century women were more in need of financial support from their husbands. Rather than staying single, they were more likely to want to get married (though they did not always have the choice). Women often needed a marriage portion or dowry to enter into marriages, which were usually provided by families; that meant, therefore, that their families had greater power to interfere with their marriages. According to cases in the Consistory Database, women's marriage choices were more influenced by the need for consent from either their families or their employers (the latter sometimes acting as the proxy of the family). The marriages especially of wealthy female heirs were heavily influenced by relatives or guardians, especially when they were young, making it difficult for them to make independent marriage choices. Similar situations sometimes affected rich widows. Fifteenth-century cases showed that some widows were also forced to remarry to men chosen by their families rather than

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<sup>77</sup> Goldberg, "Migration, Youth and Gender," 99.

themselves. Additionally, the marriage of ordinary women in the fifteenth century was heavily influenced by their families, as the society emphasized gender hierarchy. Although many of them worked, it was mainly servant work, whose meager salary was not enough to pay the dowry independently, and they thus still needed the support of the family, so their family's involvement in the marriage decision was very important.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

In the Introduction chapter, I posed the question: is the relationship between women's economic independence and marriage common and consistent? What were the specific interactions between women's economic opportunities and their marital choices in England in the late Middle Ages? Now we can answer these questions. Overall, economic independence is positively correlated with the freedom of marriage among ordinary workers. The more economically independent a woman is, the freer her marriage will be. However, social and cultural factors sometimes played a more important role in women's marriage choices than strict economics, though at the same time, women's marital options also in turn affected their economic freedom. In general, from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period, the patriarchy in the economic and social fields jointly restricted women's marital freedom. Therefore, compared with changing economic conditions, consistent social culture had a greater impact on women's marital freedom.

Firstly, no matter how the economic situation changed, patriarchy in the economic field had always constrained women's economic freedom. Gender hierarchy in the land market was consistent before and after the plague.<sup>1</sup> Women's land ownership barely changed, with daughters getting less land by inheritance as women struggled to compete in an era of severe labour shortages. Gender division was also reflected in the labour market.<sup>2</sup> From the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries after the Black Death, working women benefited from increased employment and wages due to labour shortages following a depopulation.<sup>3</sup> Since women had

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<sup>1</sup> Bardsley, "Peasant Women."

<sup>2</sup> Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood, "The Gender Division of Labour in Early Modern England," *The Economic History Review* 73, no. 1 (2020): 3–32.

<sup>3</sup> Humphries and Weisdorf, "The Wages of Women," 407.

more chances to support themselves, they were more marriageable and could also choose to marry later or remain single. However, women always tended to be precariously-employed, low-status, low-paid secondary workers.<sup>4</sup> Their economic independence and therefore marital freedom were constrained by gender inequality. In addition, working women were only substitutes for male labour, so they would be easily marginalized in the labour market.<sup>5</sup> In the late fifteenth century, as the population slowly recovered, and the economic structure became manufactured and commercialized, professional working men dominated the economy and squeezed unskilled working women out of the labour market.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, women got fewer labour opportunities and suffered worse labour conditions.<sup>7</sup> As their economic independence declined, women had to rely more on marriage for sustenance and more on family to prepare dowries for marriage. Their marital freedom had decreased along with their economic freedom.

Secondly, patriarchy in society and the household always restricted women's marital freedom. Patriarchal society tried to push women to marry, while the family tried to interfere with women's marriage choices. Medieval families were patriarchal, with the male head controlling all property. And the male-dominated society wanted wealth to be in the hands of men. Therefore, it pressured wealthy widows to remarry and heiresses to marry early. In addition, social norms didn't like women being independent and single, because these uncontrolled women caused troubles to the male-dominated society.<sup>8</sup> The autonomy of widows affected male-dominated social structures, while unmarried women might be drawn into immoral practices such as prostitution.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, society emphasized gender hierarchy and control over

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<sup>4</sup> Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered."

<sup>5</sup> McIntosh, *Working women*, 37, 41–42.

<sup>6</sup> McIntosh, 41–42.

<sup>7</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 214–15.

<sup>8</sup> Goldberg, 215.

<sup>9</sup> Goldberg, *Women in England*, 39.

women, urging them to marry and obey the rule of male household heads.

Although limited, women's economic independence increased in the fourteenth century, giving them more autonomy. But over the subsequent decades, the patriarchal society feared that ungoverned women would lead to immoral issues such as prostitution, so they tightened the restrictions on independent women. For example, a 1492 Coventry civic ordinance specified that healthy single women could not live alone or share a room with another woman but instead must live as servants in larger households (ideally headed by male citizens).<sup>10</sup> Social restrictions on the movement of single women reduced their ability to work independently to support themselves, forcing them to marry to survive. Social culture also advocated women to obey gender hierarchies. For instance, the poem "How the Goodwife Taught her daughter", written in the early 15th century, well reflects the tendency to push women marry and control their marriage choices.<sup>11</sup> "Look to your daughters that none of them is lost. From the very moment that they are of you born. Busy you, and quickly collect towards their marriage. And give them to espousing as soon as they are of age. Maidens are fair and lovable. But of their love very unstable."<sup>12</sup> "If any man pays court to you and would marry you. Look that you scorn him not, whoever he is. But show it to your family and hide you it not."<sup>13</sup> As this social ethos continued to prevail, women's freedom to marry shrank from the late fifteenth century to the early modern era. They were pushed to marry, and their marital choices were also more under the control of male guardians. And although there is a strong social and economic push for women to marry, it was often not possible, so there remained a large number of single women. Some no doubt single from choice — but as single women had few economic options, it was also usually a choice of

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<sup>10</sup> Goldberg, *Medieval England*, 215.

<sup>11</sup> Goldberg, *Women in England*, 8–9, 97–103.

<sup>12</sup> Goldberg, 102.

<sup>13</sup> Goldberg, 98.

poverty. Many other women remained unmarried because they were unable to find a spouse.

Then in the late fifteenth century, society tightened its grip on women. Male household-heads were more involved in their daughters' and female servants' marital choices. At the same time, women were less economically independent and more dependent on their family, so their marriage choices were more influenced by parents, relatives, employers, and other advisors than they were in the fourteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Although individuals have the freedom of marriage in law, women's marital freedom was restricted due to economic constraints (marriage threshold, economic transaction) and the society's requirement of women's obedience. If in the fourteenth century, only wealthy women's marriages were controlled, then in the fifteenth century, restrictions were extended to ordinary working women. Because fifteenth-century society put more emphasis on gender order, women's marital freedom was more reduced.

Therefore, in the late Middle Ages, the entrenched gender hierarchy has always restricted women's marital freedom. This may be reflected in the marriage pattern. People were motivated enough to get married early – society pushed them to get married. Marriage was essential for couples to legally have sex and create a standard medieval English family. In addition, economic transactions drove people to marry. Men needed the labour of their wives to run their families, and women also needed land or other benefits from their husbands through marriage.<sup>15</sup> However, marriage required financial conditions. Both husbands and wives needed to provide the material basis for their marriages and new families. Men had to offer land or property, and women must bring a dowry, otherwise it would be difficult to find the other half. Therefore, in the short period after the plague (1349-1375), with available land and more jobs, survivors had greater opportunities to acquire wealth and marry, and the marriage rates rose.

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<sup>14</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*.

<sup>15</sup> Bennett, "Wretched Girls," 324–28.

This contrasts sharply with the later and fewer marriages in the thirteenth century before the Black Death, and in the longer term beyond the first post-Black Death generation (1375-1500). In both periods, English marriages were consistent with the “Northwestern European Marriage Pattern”, that is, later and fewer marriages, but the reasons for their formation in the pre- and post-plague periods are somewhat different. Prior to the plague, poverty resulting from economic stagnation in the thirteenth century led to a decline in marriage rates and an increase in the age of marriage.<sup>16</sup> Many poor people did not have land or jobs, and could not afford to marry at all, so they married late or never. After the plague, during the economic rise from the late fourteenth to the mid fifteenth centuries, greater economic autonomy gave women the opportunity to marry later or not. From the late fifteenth century onwards, however, the English economy stagnated again, and women’s economic independence greatly decreased. However, their marriages still generally followed the later and fewer marriages pattern. Therefore, the cause would again be poverty. Looking at these four stages, the conclusion is clear: before industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the marriage pattern of England generally followed the modern Northwestern European marriage pattern. But the main reason for their later and fewer marriages was, for the most part, poverty, not women’s economic independence.

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<sup>16</sup> Bennett, “Wretched Girls.”



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