

## REPLY\*

Maria Moisà offers a new interpretation of what happened when people in medieval and early modern England raised money through drink, food and play. I describe these parties as charity ales at which people raised money for worthy causes; Moisà argues that one type of these ales — specifically, help-ales — had nothing to do with charity and were instead merely a venue for ‘gifts and loans among neighbours’.<sup>1</sup> This is a fundamental disagreement, but despite it, her observations echo mine in many important respects. We agree that people came together to raise money through eating and drinking, and that the money thus raised benefited a particular group, person or cause. We also agree that these ales created webs of reciprocal obligations, assisted neither the very rich nor the very poor, and promoted social cohesion. As best I can tell, we differ primarily on two issues, and on both, I remain unconvinced by Moisà’s interventions.

To begin with, Moisà insists that people who had fallen into poverty were not assisted by charity ales. Instead, she argues that the drink was so over-priced at these parties that the poor were excluded, and that ales therefore functioned as a form of monetary credit from which only the non-poor could benefit. I certainly have no illusions that charity ales benefited those on the margins of society; Moisà and I agree that, as I put it in my article, ‘vagrants, beggars or idlers were generally excluded’ from the relief provided by charity ales.<sup>2</sup> But Moisà and I do seem to have different notions about who experienced poverty in medieval and early modern England. What Moisà sees as a form of mutual help circulating among families so prosperous that poverty was never a problem, I see as a form of mutual help circulating among families who were certainly well-established in their communities but who nevertheless often either had experienced or would

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<sup>1</sup> For my original argument, see Judith M. Bennett, ‘Conviviality and Charity in Medieval and Early Modern England’, *Past and Present*, no. 134 (Feb. 1992). For the quotation from Moisà, see above 223.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. On two occasions, Moisà slightly misquotes this phrase: above 223, 228.

experience poverty. Moisa would exclude from charity ales those who moved in and out of poverty — the ‘smallholders, petty artisans, journeymen and journeywomen, unskilled labourers’ of my article.<sup>3</sup> Her reasoning for this exclusion rests on two uncertain foundations.

First, by focusing solely on the help-ales of Wakefield manor, Moisa ignores the evidence I have accumulated from elsewhere about what sorts of people attended and benefited from charity ales. To me, the Wakefield help-ales are one piece in a larger puzzle; to Moisa, they are everything. Like me, Moisa ponders the status of those who held help-ales in Wakefield, and she also finds that hosts were usually male, usually well-established, and sometimes even constables. After this, we part ways. Moisa proceeds to a close analysis of the Wakefield data; I proceed to a broader range of evidence which suggests to me that — in Wakefield, as elsewhere — poverty could embrace well-established householders and even constables. After all, Paul Slack has called a history of poverty a ‘history of the English people’, and Christopher Dyer has similarly noted that poverty was ‘a permanent condition for some and periodic problem for many’.<sup>4</sup> Moisa never directly addresses the question of *who was poor* in medieval and early modern England, but she does not seem to accept this understanding of poverty as a widespread phenomenon that embraced, as I put it in my original article, ‘perhaps between a third and one-half of the English population’.<sup>5</sup> Yet as she offers neither evidence to displace this opinion nor an alternative definition, I stand by my original characterization. In medieval and early modern England, poverty was something that could befall all but the most fortunate, and in such circumstances, a help-ale could assist, as Bishop Piers explained in his letter of 1633, ‘an

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, ‘Conviviality and Charity’, 20, n. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988), 7 (this was quoted in my original article); Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), 234. Dyer also notes on this page: ‘Poverty was experienced at many social levels in the later middle ages, frequently for smallholders and wage-earners, and occasionally among the urban artisans and middle-ranking peasants’.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett, ‘Conviviality and Charity’, 20, n. 3. As best I can tell, Moisa seems to think that when people fell on hard times, they immediately became part of the marginalized poor. She argues that help-ales would have excluded not only vagrants, beggars and idlers but also ‘a very large minority composed of smallholders, cottagers and labourers . . . who would have been labeled “vagrants” if unemployed’ (above 228).

honest man decayed in his estate'.<sup>6</sup> In short, when I seek to understand the survival of the poor in medieval and early modern England, I am thinking of a group that is larger, more socially integrated and more fluid than 'the poor' envisioned by Moisa.

Secondly, in analysing the Wakefield materials that are so central to her argument, Moisa reads the evidence in idiosyncratic ways. In arguing that the help-ales of Wakefield would have excluded the poor, she seems to consider the following points to be self-evident: (a) that 'there is a connection between the price of a gallon and the amount of the amercement' paid by commercial brewers; (b) that this same relationship must apply to amercements levied on hosts of help-ales; (c) that she can therefore determine the prices charged at help-ales; and (d) that these prices will show both who could afford to attend help-ales and how many people attended these events.<sup>7</sup> Not one of these points is self-evident to me; indeed, each is quite problematic.

Consider, for example, the first point — from which all the others flow (or do not, as the case may be). Before Moisa, no one has ever suggested that amercements of commercial brewers were directly related to ale prices, and for good reason. As the debate between Alfred N. May and J. B. Post showed long ago, manorial amercements — and especially amercements levied on commercial brewers — are devilishly hard to interpret.<sup>8</sup> A *de facto* licensing system lay behind amercements of commercial brewers who usu-

<sup>6</sup> I quoted Piers on this point in my original article: Bennett, 'Conviviality and Charity', 30. Moisa briefly questions my characterization of beneficiaries of help-ales as 'honest' people of good standing in their neighbourhoods, but her discussion confuses scot-ales and help-ales on the one hand, and Latin and English on the other. In my article, I fully discussed the extortionate scot-ales held by some officers in some places; however, there is no evidence to link such extortions to the constables who held help-ales in Wakefield. And since the sources I cite (including Piers) are in English, Moisa's comment that *honestus* is best translated as 'honourable' rather than 'honest' is beside the point.

<sup>7</sup> Above, 226-8.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred N. May, 'An Index of Thirteenth-Century Peasant Impoverishment? Manor Court Fines', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxvi (1973); J. B. Post, 'Manorial Amercements and Peasant Poverty', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxviii (1975). I discuss the enforcement of the assize of ale more fully in my book, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (Oxford, 1996). There is virtually no explicit information about the prices that commercial brewers or hosts of help-ales charged for their drink in the fifteenth-century rolls for Wakefield (see n. 13 below for a list of the rolls I have examined), and it is indeed uncommon to find such information noted in presentments made under the assize of ale. Richard Britnell's remarks for Colchester apply to most jurisdictions. He noted that jury reports in Colchester 'never comment on what prices should have been or on what prices had been actually charged. It was deemed simpler to fine all ale brewers a small

ally paid a set sum determined by a host of factors, not price alone. Commercial brewers' amercements, like all amercements in manorial courts, reflected seigneurial prosperity (or hard times), peasant poverty (or good times), or, of course, the balance of power between lords and peasants. To be sure, commercial brewers' amercements also sometimes reflected specific brewing offenses, but charging high prices for ale was only one such offense — others were selling poor quality drink, using false measures, or otherwise seeking to evade regulation. Indeed, amercements of commercial brewers most often varied not by offense at all, but instead by the frequency with which a brewer sold ale; in Wakefield in 1331, for example, Alice wife of William Molendinarius paid 3d. (she brewed once), Amabilla wife of Richard le Hyne paid 6d. (she brewed twice), and others paid as much as 18d.<sup>9</sup> Nothing in the record suggests, in other words, that amercements levied on commercial brewers reflect the prices they charged for ale, and indeed, the long-term trend in Wakefield — as Moisa herself traces it — suggests quite the opposite: as prices for ale *rose* in the later Middle Ages, the amercements of commercial brewers in Wakefield *fell*.<sup>10</sup> So, when Moisa concludes that guests at a help-ale were probably charged 6d. or 12d. per gallon *because the host had to pay a 12d. amercement*, she has reached a conclusion supported by neither the documentary record nor the historiography. Amercements paid by hosts of help-ales cannot tell us about the prices charged for ale (*if* there was a standard price at such events), or about the numbers of guests who attended, or about their social status.<sup>11</sup>

Let me briefly comment on some specific aspects of Moisa's

(n 8 cont.)

and unpunitive sum which could formally be regarded as a punishment for breaking the assize though in effect it was a tax on brewing': Richard Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300-1525* (Cambridge, 1986), 89. Some assize lists for early fourteenth-century Oxford are unusual in containing information about both prices and amercements, and they illustrate clearly the absence of a direct link between the two: see, for instance, the assize lists for September 1311 and June 1324 in *Mediaeval Archives of the University of Oxford*, ed. H. E. Salter, 2 vols. (Oxford Hist. Soc., lxx, lxxiii, Oxford, 1920-1), ii, 184-202.

<sup>9</sup> *The Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield from October 1331 to September 1333*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Yorks. Archaeol. Soc., Wakefield Court Rolls Ser., iii, Leeds, 1983), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Above, 227, where Moisa notes: 'After the plague, prices doubled and the fine-to-price ratio fell, possibly from 4:1 to 2:1'.

<sup>11</sup> In this section of her argument, Moisa so elides differences between commercial brewing and the brewing of help-ales that she finds information about help-ales in sources that never mention them (and that, indeed, pre-date by many decades their

(cont on p 239)

argument in this section. Moisa says that 'it is simply not true' that most hosts of help-ales paid amercements of one shilling, and she claims that my statement 'is a generalization on the basis of *one* tourn in one place' (her emphasis).<sup>12</sup> Yet as my text clearly indicates, I was discussing *all* the information found in the Wakefield rolls for 1412-13, and as the accompanying footnote explains, I also sampled later rolls throughout the century.<sup>13</sup> The 1412-13 rolls on which I drew for exemplary purposes include eight tourns — two each for Wakefield, Brighouse, Kirkburton and Sowerbyshire — and the figures given on page 28 of my article draw on information from all those tourns. Persons cited for holding help-ales in the 1412-13 tourns were amerced as follows: 16 at 12d.; 10 at 6d.; and 3 at 4d. Clearly, 'usually a shilling' is a fair characterization, but in any case, my major interpretative point (which Moisa's objection obscures) was that hosts of help-ales paid *heavier* amercements (whether a shilling or not) than did commercial brewers. The amercements levied on commercial brewers in the 1412-13 tourns were: 23 at 6d.; 53 at 4d.; 43 at 3d.; and 12 at 2d.<sup>14</sup> As these data show, holders of help-ales generally paid higher amercements than commercial brewers.<sup>15</sup> Despite Moisa's objections, both my general observation about higher amercements paid by hosts of help-ales and my specific point, that hosts of help-ales

(n. 11 cont.)

first appearance in the Wakefield rolls). As a result, when Moisa argues that help-ales fluctuated 'according to area, season and year' and were 'more frequent in years of plenty than in years of scarcity' (observations which would not in any way alter my interpretation), her supporting evidence consists of edited collections of the Wakefield rolls in which no help-ale citations are found (above, 224, n. 7). Moreover, as I noted in my original article, the Wakefield records which *do* contain help-ale citations 'clearly distinguish help-ales from ordinary commercial brewing'; in other words, evidence about commercial brewing cannot directly inform us about brewing for help-ales: Bennett, 'Conviviality and Charity', 28.

<sup>12</sup> Above, 224.

<sup>13</sup> I examined the following rolls, all deposited in the archives of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society under MD 225/1: 136 (1410-11); 137 (1411-12); 138/1-2 (1412-13); 142/1 (1416-17); 143/1 (1417-18); 144 (1418-19); 146/1 (1420-1); 147/1 (1421-2); 148/1 (1422-3); 178 (1452-3); 179-180 (1453-5); 198 (1472-3); 206 (1480-1); 211 (1485-6); 218 (1492-3); 221 (1495-6); 225 (1499-1500). For my book *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters*, I have examined other rolls for fifteenth-century Wakefield, but those listed above are the rolls that I analysed with particular attention to information about help-ales.

<sup>14</sup> In a few cases, amercements levied on commercial brewers are either not recorded or irretrievable.

<sup>15</sup> Within each tourn, this pattern is even clearer; in the Sowerbyshire tourns for 1412-13, holders of help-ales paid only 6d., but commercial brewers usually paid 3d. or 2d.

usually paid a shilling in 1412-13, fairly reflect the archival record. The points here are small ones, but because they rectify criticisms of my scholarship, they loom large for me.<sup>16</sup>

Moisà's other major disagreement with my essay concerns the social meaning of charity ales. Are they 'charity' (as I argue), or are they neighbourly 'gift- or help-exchange', or even informal loans 'for which no interest was charged' (as Moisà argues)?<sup>17</sup> Moisà draws a sharp line through my broad notion of charity ales — distinguishing neighbourly self-help (from which a return in this life was expected) from charity (from which — according to the definition advanced by Moisà — no return was expected until after death). Moisà's bifurcation would certainly have been recognizable to contemporaries — since they could, of course, tell the difference between alms given to a poor stranger and assistance given to a neighbour. But this sharp distinction does not help us to understand what happened when neighbours got together to drink, talk, play, and raise money.

When Moisà, speaking of help-ales, says that '[h]elp between friends and neighbours should be placed among the gift and credit institutions rather than under the mantle of charity-almsgiving-poor relief', she misunderstands both 'charity' and 'charity ales'.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, charity included unreciprocated almsgiving to destitute strangers, but it was also much more. Charity began at home: as William Langland advised in *Piers Plowman*, 'Help thy kin, Christ bid, for there beginneth charity'.<sup>19</sup> Charity extended to friends and neighbours: as Reginald Pecock in *The Donet* defined charity, it was 'well willing to our neighbour'.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Limitations of space prohibit me from providing a point-by-point response to Moisà's other criticisms, but I would like to assure readers of this exchange that I have rechecked both my original text and my research on all the points Moisà raises, and in only one instance have her comments given me pause. Because it never occurred to me that someone might read 'gathering' as a 'gathering of people' instead of a 'gathering of contributions' (see above, 224, n. 4), I am afraid that I misled Moisà and perhaps other readers of my article with my comments in n. 53. I mentioned women's gatherings — as well as Diane Willen's research on women in urban schemes for poor relief — as examples of women's participation in local charitable activities, not women's participation in ales *per se*: Bennett, 'Conviviality and Charity', 40, n. 53.

<sup>17</sup> Above, 230, 231.

<sup>18</sup> Above, 231.

<sup>19</sup> William Langland, *Piers Plowman (C-text)*, ed. Derek Pearsall (London, 1978), 281.

<sup>20</sup> Reginald Pecock, *The Donet*, ed. Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock (Early Eng. Text Soc., clvi, London, 1921), 105. As both *Piers Plowman* and *The Donet* contain many other mentions of charity, these quotations indicate just one of the uses to which the word is put in each of these works.

And charity embraced more than just unreciprocated giving: the Elizabethan statute of charitable trusts noted that charity went not just to aid 'aged impotent and poor people', but also to assist soldiers and mariners, to support schools and scholars, to repair public structures such as bridges and churches, to maintain prisons and relieve prisoners, to assist in the education, placement, and marriage of orphans and other young people, to help poor people pay taxes, and to assist 'young tradesmen, handicraftsmen and persons decayed'.<sup>21</sup> 'Charity' was an extraordinarily rich word in medieval and early modern England: it meant love and kindness and affection; it meant hospitality and large-heartedness and fairness; it meant beneficence and almsgiving and assistance to neighbours; and it meant a specific gift or bequest or allowance of food.<sup>22</sup>

Moisà's argument would rob 'charity' of these complex contemporary significations, and she would similarly deprive charity ales of their many social meanings. Charity ales were not, of course, charity as Moisà has defined the term — that is, they were not income-generating events motivated solely by religious ideals. But they were charity in the sense that the word was understood at the time, for they entailed goodwill, hospitality, reciprocity, neighbourliness, *and* the raising of money for a variety of social needs (including assistance for neighbours who had fallen into poverty). At charity ales, self-help, self-interest, reciprocity, neighbourliness and concern for those less fortunate mingled together into something for which there is no better word than the one that contemporaries used so often: as Bishop Piers put it, they were 'Feasts of Charity'.<sup>23</sup>

Although I am neither persuaded by Moisà's argument nor willing to accept her characterizations of my work, I welcome the opportunity to emphasize again the main point of my article.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> W. K. Jordan, *Philanthropy in England, 1480-1660* (London, 1959), 112-13.

<sup>22</sup> s.v. 'charity' in *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'charite' in *Middle English Dictionary*, and 'caritas' in *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*.

<sup>23</sup> From a letter of Bishop Piers to Archbishop Laud (1633), as transcribed in William Prynne, *Canterburies Doome* (London, 1646, STC P3917), 142. Piers's letter describes all sorts of charity ales; at this point, he was specifically discussing church-ales.

<sup>24</sup> Let me briefly respond to three more aspects of Moisà's representation of my research. First, Moisà implies that I unjustifiably moved from an observation that Wakefield help-ales were usually hosted by men to an argument that women particularly benefited from them (above, 224). But my speculative remarks about the role of women in these events considered *all charity ales* (not just help-ales), drew on *all the evidence* (not just the rolls of Wakefield), and, in any case, emphasized the social

Bride-ales, church-ales, help-ales, and the numerous other charity ales of medieval and early modern England rightly direct our attention away from the charitable provisions of the rich and towards the charitable institutions of ordinary people. These institutions eased poverty and other social problems while also solidifying neighbourliness, building reciprocal bonds and facilitating sociability. If poor couples hoped to marry, or people fell onto hard times, or widows needed help, they could reasonably hope that their neighbours and friends might gather together to drink, eat, play and raise money on their behalf. No strangers to poverty, the ordinary people of medieval and early modern England helped each other to survive.

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reciprocity of these events, not their cash benefits to women. Secondly, Moisa characterizes my understanding of charity as based on either non-medieval sources or 'secondary works which interpret hospitality and charity in the light of what we know about the behaviour of the nobility and of the merchant class'. To assess the fairness of this charge, readers need only compare Moisa, n. 23 to the sources cited in nn. 6-10 of my original article. Thirdly, Moisa suggests that my only 'original research' concerns the Wakefield help-ales; in so doing, she both ignores the archival materials cited in n. 16 of my article and discounts the evidence I found in literary accounts, edited collections of numerous primary materials (not just 'parish accounts') and antiquarians' reports.