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The Village Ale-Wife: Women and Brewing in Fourteenth-Century England

The medieval peasant diet was plain and basic; most peasant meals consisted only of bread, ale, and soup with some variation provided by seasonal fruits, legumes, and vegetables. But the simplicity of the fare did not guarantee that most families could fill their daily needs by domestic production alone. Because the manufacture of bread and ale necessitated expensive equipment and required considerable labor, medieval households were seldom able to stock these products without recourse to commercial markets. In the towns and villages of medieval England, most families depended heavily upon commercial bakers and brewers to provide the basic foodstuffs that were consumed daily. Even in the countryside, where so many of the everyday needs of the family economy were met through direct production, dependence upon the purchase of bread and ale was common. The tension created by the absolute need for these products and the inability of most households to produce them directly was reflected in the animosity directed against food purveyors in medieval literature. The author of *Piers Plowman* bitterly urged officials:

To punish on pillories and punishment stools
Brewers and bakers and butchers and cooks
For these are this world's men that work the most harm
For the poor people that must buy piece-meal.¹

In the thirteenth century, the English government began to regulate the sale of these two basic foodstuffs through the Assize of Bread and Ale, which created national standards of measurement, quality, and pricing. Weights and measures were to be checked for accuracy, quality was to be carefully

monitored, and prices were to be determined by a sliding scale based upon fluctuations in the cost of grains.² The right to enforce the regulations of the Assize of Bread and Ale quickly devolved upon local authorities. In the countryside, jurisdiction fell to manorial lords, who supervised sales of bread and ale through frequent meetings of the manorial court. As actually administered in these rural tribunals, the Assize became a licensing system; all commercial brewers and bakers paid regular fines for the right to practice their trades. Persons who sold bread or ale illegally—with improper measures, at exorbitant prices, without adequate quality control—paid especially heavy, punitive fines, but all vendors of these products were liable for some payment.³ Bakers commonly paid one large annual fine (usually rendered at the yearly Great Court or View of Frankpledge). Brewers, however, were often assessed at regular intervals throughout the year. At every triweekly meeting of the manorial court, the ale-tasters (officers responsible for the onerous task of tasting and certifying all batches of ale prior to sale) identified and fined all persons who had sold ale in the interval since the last court meeting.

The different tactics adopted by most manorial courts to supervise the bread and ale industries reflect differences in the crafts. Baking could be adequately regulated by yearly presentments because it was a more stable industry. Requiring ovens that were comparatively expensive to obtain and to operate, baking quickly professionalized, with most villages serviced by a handful of bakers strongly committed to the business.⁴ The skills and equipment required for brewing, in contrast, were readily available in many households, and commercial brewing was much more widely dispersed through most rural communities. The necessary supplies were extensive, but available in most households; large pots, vats, ladles, and straining cloths were found in the *principalia* of even the poorest households.⁵ But although the capacity to produce ale was present in many households, the process was so time-consuming and the final product soured so quickly that most families simply could not meet their needs by domestic production alone. The grain, usually barley, had to be soaked for several days, then drained of excess water and carefully germinated to create malt. After the malt was dried and ground, it was added to hot water for fermentation. From this mixture was drained off the wort, to which herbs or yeast could be added as a final touch.⁶ Ale production took many days and much labor, but until hops were introduced from the Continent in the late fourteenth century (producing a new beverage called beer), English ale soured within only a few days. And since ale was virtually the sole liquid consumed by medieval peasants (water was considered to be unhealthy), each household required a large and steady supply of this perishable item.⁷ The solution for many households was to alternate buying ale and producing ale for domestic

consumption, selling to neighbors any excess ale from such brewings. As a result, a large number of people sold ale unpredictably and intermittently, and weekly presentments by ale-tasters were necessary to ensure proper regulation of the industry.

The abundant records generated by official supervision of the ale industry offer unusual insights into the rural family economy of the late thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. In several respects, the brewing industry of the later Middle Ages foreshadowed the domestic industries that would flourish in the villages of later centuries. Commercial brewing in the medieval countryside lacked, to be sure, the entrepreneurial element so crucial to the putting-out of textile production in the cottages of early modern England; no merchant-entrepreneurs organized or profited from rural ale sales in the fourteenth century. But brewing was, like domestic industries, an economic activity particularly attractive to women seeking ways of supplementing their household economies.⁸ Commercial brewing was seldom the primary support of a peasant household; most brewing households possessed lands that provided the mainstay of the domestic economy, and most brewers sold ale so intermittently that their households could not have relied upon ale profits for basic support. As a supplementary source of income, brewing was often relegated to women, who found that its amenability to home production matched well with their other domestic responsibilities.⁹ In preindustrial Europe, women characteristically sought out market activities associated with other home work that could bring income into their households. They sold surplus produce, they worked as carders or spinners, they hired themselves out as wet nurses, and, before the ale industry centralized and capitalized in the early modern centuries, they sold ale to their neighbors. Women's commercial ale production is distinguished from other market activities only by its rich documentation from a very early period.

In this essay, the ale fines recorded in the manorial court of Brigstock (Northamptonshire) during the six decades prior to the arrival of the Black Death in 1348 will be used to explore the part that brewing for commercial profit played in women's lives. Looking at which women brewed for profit, under what circumstances they entered the ale business, and what advantages they did (or did not) obtain from their commercial activities, we will use the Brigstock data to assess the importance of commercial work in the lives of preindustrial women. We have heard much in the recent past about the weak work-identity of women in both preindustrial and industrial economies. Women were/are dabblers; they fail to attain high skill levels; they abandon work when it conflicts with marital or familial obligations.¹⁰ For a medieval ale-wife, as we shall see, such behavior was both practical and rational.

Brigstock, with its daughter settlement Stanion, lay in the heart of Rockingham Forest surrounded on all sides by royal preserves, and its economy was roughly typical of other forest manors. Cultivating the open fields of their community, the constituents of Brigstock manor also supplemented their incomes by exploiting (both legally and illegally) the many resources of the adjacent parks and woodlands—using these areas for pasturing pigs, for hunting, for making charcoal, and for assarting (converting wasteland or woodland into arable). As in many other contemporary manors, the first half of the fourteenth century was not a boom period in Brigstock; its economy was faltering, and its population (of roughly 300 to 500 male adults) was stagnant, if not declining.¹¹

Because at least one-fourth of the women identified in pre-plague Brigstock paid ale fines, selling ale must have been characteristic of many households on the manor. Indeed, the high proportion of women known to have sold ale suggests that all adult women were skilled at brewing ale, even if only some brewed ale for profit.¹² Although female participation in the ale trade was widespread, it varied greatly (see Table 1). Selling ale only infrequently and sporadically, most of Brigstock's female brewers were simply making an occasional profit from a household task; when these women sometimes brewed for domestic consumption, they brewed larger amounts than necessary and sold the excess to their neighbors. Although minor brewers collectively accounted for over one-third of the manor's ale trade, their market activity, on an individual level, was fairly insignificant. On the average, each paid only about five ale fines during her career. And most minor brewers paid their few ale fines over the course of many years; Emma Pote, for example, accumulated twenty-two ale fines over a period of

TABLE 1
Distribution of Ale Fines in Brigstock

CATEGORY	INDIVIDUALS		FINES	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
ALE-WIVES (30 or more fines each)	38	11.5	2265	61
MINOR FEMALE BREWERS (1-27 fines each)	273	82.5	1412	38
MINOR MALE BREWERS (1-16 fines each)	20	6.0	47	1
ALL BREWERS	331	100.0	3724	100

Note: This table excludes 120 fines paid by women who were incompletely identified.

wives. Although Brigstock's professional brewers included a few widows, these women had begun selling ale before their husbands died, and several withdrew from the ale market within a few years of widowhood. Similarly, no single women or dependent daughters have been identified among Brigstock's major commercial brewers.¹⁶

As suggested by the preponderance of wives, brewing seems to have been too complex and costly a business to be pursued by women who lacked the support of a full household. Instead, it was usually a family affair that wives organized and supervised. The ale-wife's position as overseer of a household activity is best seen in the brewing histories of single households that often included not only the wife but also occasionally the husband and/or daughter. Alice, the wife of Richard Coleman, for example, accumulated seventy ale fines between 1299 and 1325. On one occasion, in November 1313 (when Alice was perhaps ill or otherwise incapacitated), her husband Richard paid the ale fine. When Alice stopped commercial brewing a little over a decade later, her daughter Emma took over the business for several years. During these decades, the entire Coleman household was clearly committed to commercial brewing; the family's female head usually paid the ale fine, but other family members replaced her whenever necessary. Alice Coleman did not work independently at a lucrative trade, but rather supervised an activity that involved her entire household.

The brewing history of Richard and Alice Coleman's household was also typical in its relationship to other brewing households in the community. As a rule, most ale-wives were related to other women active in the ale trade. At the same time that Alice Coleman and her household were producing and selling ale, the wives of Richard Coleman's two brothers were also active in the ale market. Alice Coleman might have exchanged supplies, tools, and techniques with her sisters-in-law, but these women did not sell ale in common. Instead, they competed in the ale market, offering their products for sale simultaneously. In Brigstock, the nuclear family household was the basic unit of the brewing business.¹⁷

Although ale-wives spent many active years in the industry, their market activity was neither steady nor predictable. Most ale-wives worked in commercial brewing for about two decades (average length of career: 20.6 years), but during that period they brewed irregularly and often stopped brewing for considerable lengths of time. Usually an ale-wife sold ale on only about one-third of the occasions available to her; the surviving courts contain about nine presentments by the ale-tasters for each year, but ale-wives averaged only three or four ale fines annually during the course of their careers. The wife of Richard Gilbert, for example, accumulated fifty-eight ale citations between 1328 and 1345. In some years, her market activity approached saturation, but in other years, her participation dropped

TABLE 2
The Social Backgrounds of Brigstock's Ale-Wives

CATEGORY	Number	Percent
SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS		
Husband held local office	13	34
Husband never held local office	22	58
Unknown	3	8
LONGEVITY OF RESIDENCE		
Identified by permanent surname	23	61
Identified by impermanent surname	13	34
Unknown	2	5

twenty-two years. This informal and unpredictable source of commercial ale was underpinned in Brigstock by a small elite group of thirty-eight brewers, who steadily met the basic needs of the manor's ale market. Dominating the ale trade of their community, these few dozen women were not making a casual and occasional profit from a household chore; they were ale-wives—women who frequently supplemented their household economies by selling ale on the commercial market.¹³

Who were these ale-wives? Commercial brewing was not a preserve of the privileged, nor was it abandoned to the poor (see Table 2). Since households headed by officeholders were usually wealthier and more powerful than other households, socioeconomic position has been estimated by tracing each ale-wife's place in the official structure of the community.¹⁴ The households of some ale-wives were headed by males who wielded considerable political and economic influence in Brigstock, but many other ale-wives were less fortunate and came from households headed by men of more modest influence. The distribution of ale-wives between officeholding and non-officeholding households roughly paralleled the overall pattern in the community. Of the 277 surnames identified in Brigstock, 35 percent were associated with officeholding; 34 percent of ale-wives came from such officeholding households. Although socioeconomic position was relatively unimportant to the trade, long residence on the manor was vital. Only 32 percent of Brigstock's surnames betrayed permanence of residence (appearing in the records throughout the period surveyed), but almost two-thirds of Brigstock's ale-wives were identified by such enduring surnames.¹⁵ Neither itinerants nor newcomers (of whom there were many in Brigstock) could hope to turn a tidy profit in the ale business. The most distinctive characteristic of ale-wives, however, is that they were, just as their title implies, not daughters, not widows, but

to negligible levels, and for five years in the midst of her brewing career, she totally ceased brewing.¹⁸ Her career was typical; the average ale-wife accumulated a large number of fines not because she brewed regularly but because she brewed intermittently over long periods.

The Brigstock ale-wife was, insofar as information is available, fairly typical.¹⁹ But she did differ from other rural brewers in one important respect: she faced almost no significant male competition. Only a few dozen ale fines were assessed against Brigstock males, and all such men were married to women already active in the ale market. Brigstock was rather unusual in this respect. For comparison, consider (1) the Midlands manor of Houghton-cum-Wyton, where—during the same decades—11 percent of all brewing fines were levied against men, and (2) the pastoral manor of Iver in Buckinghamshire, where males accounted for 71 percent of all brewing fines.²⁰

These vastly different levels of male/female brewing are not reflections of broad variations in the organization of the ale industry on these three manors. As in Brigstock, brewing activity in both Houghton and Iver was dispersed among households of diverse socioeconomic status, but was especially pursued by long resident families. Similarly, the distribution of casual and committed brewers did not vary significantly; on all three manors, a large proportion of fines were paid by very occasional brewers. Insofar as the economic viability of the ale industry can be judged by patterns in ale fines (both total number levied and average amount assessed), it also does not correlate with shifts in the numbers of men and women involved in the trade. Except for their widely divergent sex ratios, the ale industries of Brigstock, Houghton, and Iver were remarkably similar.²¹

The explanation for these different levels of male/female brewing lies less with industrial organization than with the internal dynamics of the family economy. Every rural household had to decide how best, in view of local economic opportunities, to distribute its labor resources. The decision about whether the male or female head of household would supervise brewing probably reflects regional variations in the rural economy. In some environments, it made sense to leave the brewing to women, but in other areas men had both the time and the inclination to get involved in commercial ale production. Iver's villagers supported themselves primarily through stock-raising and fishing. Because these activities were not particularly labor-intensive, Iver's males got involved in brewing and dominated this industry in their village. Houghton was a classic open-field farming community, and the yearly cycle of plowing, sowing, and harvesting left considerably fewer males free to engage in commercial brewing. In the forest manor of Brigstock, males not only worked in the village's open field but also were

diverted from brewing by their activities in the surrounding woodlands (hunting, assarting, etc.).²² Women were, it seems, most likely to supervise their families' brewing businesses when their husbands' primary work responsibilities were arduous and time-consuming. Historians have long recognized that certain rural economies were especially suited for the introduction of domestic industries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; regions with many small holdings or much pastoralism boasted populations both willing and able to take industrial work into their homes.²³ The data on the sex ratios of the medieval brewing industry suggest that this same regional dynamic also influenced the sexual division of labor within families involved in industrial activities.

The hypothesis that different levels of male/female brewing are related to variations in the allocation of labor within the peasant household is confirmed by a characteristic common to the food markets of all three villages. Despite the widely different ratios of female brewing in Iver, Houghton, and Brigstock, the relative number of women involved in food trades in all three communities steadily increased through the early decades of the fourteenth century. In other words, proportionally more females were selling foodstuffs in the 1340s than in earlier decades.²⁴ The best explanation for this common trend lies in changing economic opportunities that, in turn, altered the distribution of work within the rural family economy. It seems highly probable that the economic problems of the decades that preceded the plague drew male attention away from secondary pursuits like commercial brewing. Brewing was an almost universal female skill that confined workers to the household area; as a result, families faced with economic hardship could most easily relegate commercial brewing to their female members and hence, release males to seek economic relief in other sectors. In short, the internal dynamics of the rural household economy best explain fluctuations—both regionally and chronologically—in levels of female commercial brewing.²⁵ Women only dominated the brewing industries of their communities when the economic energies of the men in their households were diverted elsewhere.

What did their commercial activities mean to the women who worked in these rather tenuous circumstances? The records are largely silent on this issue—we have no personal diaries, no observers' reports, no letters that can illuminate the private satisfactions of rural ale-wives or the subtle ways in which commercial brewing might have enhanced a woman's stature in the eyes of relatives, friends and neighbors. Because an ale-wife brought cash into the peasant household, her efforts might have somewhat equalized her relationship with her husband. Because her sales of ale helped to maintain or even to enhance her family's socioeconomic status, she might have

ained personal prestige as a clever household manager among her friends and neighbors. Because her market work brought her into contact with many other villagers, she might have enjoyed a breadth of social acquaintance that distinguished her from other women. Such benefits, however probable, cannot be verified.²⁶

Instead, the extant records demonstrate quite clearly that ale-wives—despite their public activity in the ale market—did not derive any special public benefits from their work. As a general rule, women in all medieval villages lacked basic political, legal, and economic rights. Manorial courts refused to accept women as personal pledges or tithing members (excluding them from the systems of mutual dependence and reciprocity that bound males together), denied women the right to serve in the numerous offices of rural communities (excluding them from political power and prestige), and guaranteed the rather extensive rights of husbands over their wives' real properties (denying economic autonomy to married women). Women appeared before these tribunals much less frequently than men and were usually accompanied or assisted by male relatives.²⁷ The records of any manor court show most men acting comfortably as individuals in a male forum, and many women acting as household dependents when they hesitatingly ventured into this male world.

Work in the commercial ale market did not give women access to these male privileges and obligations. On a broad comparative level, one might have anticipated that strong contrasts in female rights and public visibility would have distinguished manors where women were commercially active from manors in which most commerce was controlled by men. Such contrasts have not been found; Brigstock women, who thoroughly controlled their community's major commercial product, enjoyed no special rights or legal perquisites that were denied the women of manors like Iver, where men dominated the brewing industry. A similar inertia is found in comparisons of brewing and nonbrewing women within a single community; Brigstock ale-wives—despite their very public activities in the ale market of the manor—were just as disabled in the manorial court as other women. Consider Brigstock's ten most active ale-wives (who each accrued 70 or more citations for ale sales). These women seldom came to court except to pay ale fines, and they were almost invariably accompanied or assisted by their husbands.²⁸ Margery, the wife of William Golle, is the exception who proves the rule. She was unusually active (for a woman) in the Brigstock court, paying 119 ale fines and appearing on numerous other occasions (including 11 court cases against other villagers). She was sued several times by persons who claimed that she had unjustly slandered them in the community. But in every litigious appearance, Margery Golle pleaded jointly with her husband (even when the dispute arose from Margery's misconduct

alone).²⁹ Margery Golle's market activities doubtless brought her into contact with numerous persons in the Brigstock community, but she came to the court shadowed and protected by her husband. Needless to say, Brigstock's ale-wives, despite their proven public reliability as ale sellers, could not serve as personal pledges, and they were not, despite their obvious qualifications, elected to serve as ale-tasters. In the eyes of one of the most important institutions in medieval rural life—the triweekly gathering of the community at the manorial court—an ale-wife was, quite simply, just another dependent wife.

The failure of an ale-wife's public activity in the ale market to translate into changed behavior in the manorial court is not necessarily remarkable. But its full implications can best be seen by adding two contrasting perspectives to this picture of public immobility. First, commercial activity and court responsibilities were not invariably separate but could be closely tied if the brewer was male. Because women's court roles were so severely limited, one cannot straightforwardly compare the public benefits acquired (or not acquired) by males and females through commercial brewing. Since women started from a position of legal disability, any advancement—women pledging, women pleading more cases alone, women controlling their own lands—would have indicated a growth in public authority. But since men were not so legally restricted, their public advancement can best be analyzed through tracing public behavior that was relatively unusual for males—the holding of public office. If Iver was typical of other manors whose ale markets were dominated by males, brewing could be a major route to public advancement and authority for males. Male brewers in Iver were twice as likely as nonbrewing males to wield political power through public office. Indeed, most officers were also brewers.³⁰ Unlike female brewers, whose court careers were undifferentiated from those of nonbrewing women, male brewers distinguished themselves from other men in the political life of the manor. For men, commercial brewing and public power were closely linked; the wall that separated commercial success and public authority obstructed only women.

The second perspective complements the first. Although ale-wives failed to penetrate the legal and political institutions of their society, some women did break through and attain a public stature that was denied most members of their sex. Women achieved this feat not by actively participating in commercial markets, but instead by passively outliving their husbands. On a few infrequent occasions, the Brigstock court accepted a woman as a personal pledge, accepted a female guarantor for another's conduct. The unusual women granted this privilege were not highly successful ale-wives, but widows pledging for the misdeeds of their household dependents. Widows also distinguished themselves from other women by

their greater independence of court action and more secure property tenure.³¹ A woman most closely approximated the legal and political status of males not through her work, but through her household status.

The commercial work of the medieval ale-wife, then, was a very limited form of public activity constantly bounded by private requirements. Her experiences say much about the lives of all women in rural England during these centuries. The basic factor that distinguished the public lives of adult women and adult men was household position. Men, as heads of households, possessed legal, political, and economic authority. They acted freely in the manor court, they held village offices, they controlled landed properties, and they derived direct public benefits from commercial work. To be sure, men accepted familial responsibilities and limitations, but they represented (indeed, personified) the familial household whose other members were submerged into that corporate identity. Women, as dependents in these male-headed households, lacked the public rights and authority accorded their fathers and husbands. They required assistance in court actions, they never wielded official authority, they forfeited control of their landed properties to their husbands, and they obtained no direct public authority from their market activities. In early fourteenth-century Brigstock, a woman's life changed most dramatically not through her work but through changes in her status within her household (changes over which, in the case of widowhood, she had little control). Her public status waxed and waned as her familial status shifted (from daughter to wife to widow) and with the economic fortunes of her family. Hence, all of a woman's activities—including her commercial efforts—were merged into her more important familial role.

Given the familial context of these women's lives, the medieval ale industry well suited their needs.³² Because ale transported poorly, it was unsuitable for large-scale, centralized businesses. Because ale soured quickly, most households had to purchase at least some of their drink. Because ale production involved widely known female skills, tools available in many households, and intermittent attention over long periods of time, it appealed to women who sought simple ways of supplementing their family economies. As a result, many rural women occasionally sold ale, but even long-term participants in the ale market betrayed the familial underpinnings of their work. Ale-wives were classic female workers: their work changed with shifts in marital status, their work was relatively low-skilled, their work was unpredictable and unsteady, and their work was highly sensitive to male economic priorities (and susceptible to male incursions).³³ These work habits made perfect sense in the rural family economy of a society that embedded female lives into the fortunes of their families. An ale-wife was a wife first and only secondarily an ale seller.

This chapter is largely based upon an analysis of the brewing industry of Brigstock found in my doctoral dissertation, "Gender, Family and Community: A Comparative Study of the English Peasantry, 1287-1349," University of Toronto, 1981, pp. 143-91. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington, D.C., December 1982. This study was completed before the publication of Christopher Dyer's discussion of medieval diet (using maintenance agreements), but our findings are generally complementary. See "English Diet in the Later Middle Ages," in *Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R. H. Hilton*, ed. T. H. Aston et al. (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 191-216.

1. William Langland, *The Book Concerning Piers the Plowman*, trans. and ed. Donald and Rachel Artwater (1907; rpt. London, 1959), p. 21. For the text in Middle English, see the edition by George Kane, *Piers Plowman: The A Version* (London, 1960), p. 232 (Passus III).

2. *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1 (London, 1810), pp. 199-204.

3. Helen Cam, *The Hundred and the Hundred Rolls* (London, 1930), p. 211; Rodney H. Hilton, "Women in the Village," in *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975), p. 104; Edward Britton, *The Community of the Vill* (Toronto, 1977), p. 25. In Brigstock, some brewers purchased long-term licenses (*licencia braciandi*) to cover several months of brewing activity.

4. A full analysis of the baking industry is beyond the scope of this essay, but the Brigstock evidence suggests that baking was generally more professionalized than brewing. Commercial baking involved a considerably smaller number of people; 105 bakers were cited in Brigstock (of whom 15 people accounted for nearly one-half of all fines) as opposed to 331 cited brewers. Moreover, many more males were cited for bread sales; 42 percent of bread fines were paid by males against about 1 percent of ale fines. Because baking must have exceeded the production capacities of most households, bread was probably more frequently purchased than ale, making baking a more lucrative and concentrated business. See Bennett, "Gender," pp. 171-82.

5. R. K. Field, "Worcestershire Peasant Buildings, Household Goods and Farming Equipment in the Later Middle Ages," *Medieval Archaeology* 9 (1965): 105-45. Many of the households listed in Field's appendix boasted equipment used in brewing. For example, the goods belonging to the cottager Thomas atte Frythe of early fifteenth-century Stoke Prior included a brass pot, a mashing vat, and barrels for storing both ale and liquor (p. 138).

6. For a comprehensive survey of the processes involved in ale and beer production in preindustrial England, see H. A. Monckton, *A History of English Ale and Beer* (London, 1966), pp. 11-82.

7. The average daily consumption of ale by the English peasantry is unknown, but the normal monastic allowance was one gallon of good ale per day, often supplemented with a second gallon of weak ale. L. F. Salzman, *English Industries of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1923), p. 286.

8. For a general survey and introduction to domestic industries, see Hermann Kellenbenz, "Rural Industries in the West from the end of the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century," in *Essays in European Economic History, 1500-1800*, ed. Perer Earle (Oxford, 1974), pp. 45-88. For the participation of women in domestic industry, see Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York, 1978), esp. pp. 43-60, and Olwen Hufton, "Women and the Family Economy in Eighteenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 9 (1975): 1-22.

9. The assumption that women were prominent in commercial brewing because it merged well with their other domestic tasks has been challenged by Christopher Middleton, "The Sexual Division of Labour in Feudal England," *New Left Review* 113-14 (1979): 154-55. Middleton argued that we cannot assume that women's work, simply because of a biological imperative, centered around the home. But Barbara Hanawalt's analysis of coroner's rolls has established that women did generally spend their days in the vicinity of the home; see "Childrearing Among the Lower Classes of Late Medieval England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (1977): 1-22.

10. This was a recurring theme in a workshop entitled "Working Women in Early Modern Europe: A Cross-Cultural Approach," at the Fifth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women (Vassar College, 1981). See also Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon," chap. 9, this volume.

11. Some of the inhabitants of Stanion were subject to the Brigstock court, which recorded the presentments of a separate ale-taster for Stanion. As a result, the Brigstock ale industry described in this chapter incorporates the activities of all brewers on the manor—whether in Stanion or in Brigstock proper. The records for Brigstock cover the years from 1287 through 1348 and are found in the Northamptonshire Record Office (Montagu Collection, Boxes X364A through X365) and the Public Record Office, Series SC-2: 194/65. For details on the economy and demography of Brigstock during these decades, see Bennett, "Gender," pp. 43-57.

12. Estimates of how many women in Brigstock actually brewed commercially can be only tentative. It is extremely difficult to trace female individuals in manor courts because women usually changed their names upon marriage. Hence, one woman could be counted twice: first under her natal surname and second under her marital name. This bias is partially offset by the fact that counts of individual women and counts of individual female brewers suffer from the same handicap. Of the 843 individual females counted in the surname groups of Brigstock, 309 (37 percent) were cited for brewing activities. This count excludes brewing by isolated individuals outside of the main 277 surnames on the manor (2 ale-wives were isolated individuals). A second method of measuring the proportion of women in Brigstock who brewed commercially also yields high levels. One can offset the chronic underrepresentation of women in the Brigstock court by assuming that the number of women on the manor was roughly equal to the known number of males (1,149 males). In such a case, 309 women brewed out of a possible 1,149 women on the manor (27 percent). These figures differ slightly from those discussed in my dissertation because of reanalyses undertaken in preparation for my book, *Women in the Medieval Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).

13. The term "ale-wife" does not appear in the manorial records of Brigstock because the clerks wrote in Latin. In this essay, ale-wife applies only to major brewers (30 or more citations), on the assumption that contemporaries would have used this term only to designate women who frequently brewed or sold ale. *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites the first use of "ale-wife" in some versions of *Piers Plowman* as synonymous with brewster. It also notes that the term need not indicate marital status because wife in Middle English often simply signified woman. *The Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1956) defines ale-wife as barmaid, but presents no contemporary usages to support this curious definition.

14. The correlation between socioeconomic status and officeholding has been much discussed in the historical literature. For the most comprehensive analysis, see

Anne DeWindt, "Peasant Power Structures in Fourteenth-Century King's Ripton," *Medieval Studies* 38 (1976): 236-67. For specific data on this correlation in Brigstock, see Bennett, "Gender," pp. 59-76.

15. These proportions of officeholding and permanent surnames in Brigstock reflect recalculations undertaken since the dissertation.

16. Of Brigstock's thirty-eight ale-wives, twenty-eight (74 percent) were identified as wives throughout their brewing careers. Five additional ale-wives (13 percent) brewed both when married and during widowhood. The marital status of the five remaining ale-wives (13 percent) was unstated.

17. Of Brigstock's thirty-six traceable ale-wives (two ale-wives were isolated individuals who cannot be linked to any households in the community), thirty (83 percent) had presumed kin (shared surname) who were also brewers. Wives, husbands, and daughters were assessed for ale sales sequentially (with different persons in the household accepting legal responsibility at various times); non-household kin were frequently assessed in the same court sessions (indicating that they were both selling ale within the same time period—in probable competition with one another).

18. The wife of Richard Gilbert was chosen for detailed analysis because her career most exemplified the average pattern. She received fifty-eight citations (average for all ale-wives was fifty-nine). She brewed for seventeen years (1328-1345), and she averaged 3.4 fines per year. Between 1328 and 1334, she received fines in about half of the surviving ale presentments. In 1335, 1336, and 1338, she was fined in fewer than one of every five ale-tasters' reports. In 1337, however, she was fined on nine out of ten possible occasions. In 1339, 1340, 1341, 1342, and 1344, she received no ale fines. In 1343, she was fined once, and she received three fines in 1345 (a year with thirteen ale presentments). Although her career history might indicate that ale-wives brewed less regularly toward the end of their careers, the histories of other ale-wives do not support this notion. Margery Golle, for example, brewed between 1306 and 1345. Although she was fairly active between 1311 and 1322, she brewed irregularly from 1323 to 1331 (in many years she received no citations), but then resumed an active career in the 1330s.

19. Although specific points of comparison showed some variation, my analyses of brewing in both Iver and Houghton also indicated that ale-wives on those manors were usually married women from the more settled families in the community. Data from both manors also reinforce the conclusion that brewing for commercial profit was a household business that involved all members of a nuclear unit. Bennett, "Gender," pp. 262-72, pp. 320-28. The studies of Edwin DeWindt (*Land and People in Holywell-cum-Needingworth* [Toronto, 1972], pp. 237-38) and Edward Britton (*Community*, pp. 87-88) also demonstrated that producers of ale were neither poor nor itinerant. The only contrary evidence has been found by Richard Smith in his analyses of Redgrave and Rickinghall, where ale sellers were not only economically underprivileged but also often unmarried (either single or widowed women). See his dissertation, "English Peasant Life-Cycles and Socio-Economic Networks: A Quantitative Geographical Case Study," Cambridge University, 1974, pp. 150-78. Perhaps these differences were caused by different methods of ale production (manorial brewhouse versus home brewing?), but the matter is, at this point, only speculative. Clearly the subject merits more thorough enquiry.

20. Bennett, "Gender," pp. 262-72, 320-28.

21. It is exceedingly difficult to compare accumulations of ale fines in the courts of different manors because evidentiary factors—how frequently the courts were

held, how many courts have survived—make each manor's data unique. For example, the criterion used to distinguish major brewers in Brigstock (30 or more citations) is too rigorous for either the Iver data (1,654 citations for ale sales) or the Houghton data (188 ale fines). The best comparison (average fines paid per cited brewer) reveals figures that vary not according to the male/female composition of the industry, but rather according to the number of recorded fines: Brigstock average, 11.4 (3,844 extant fines); Iver average, 4.7 (1,654 extant fines); Houghton average, 1.9 (188 extant fines). Moreover, both Iver and Houghton generally parallel Brigstock in boasting many individuals who received only a few ale fines. Of Iver's 354 brewers, 190 received only one or two fines. In Houghton, 80 of the 99 cited brewers paid only one or two fines.

Both the amount of the standard ale fine and the number of fines levied varied tremendously in Brigstock. In the late thirteenth century, the standard ale fine was 6 pence, but it fell fairly steadily until the late 1340s, when most brewers paid fines of only 1 pence. The average number of brewers cited (calculated in five-year periods) also varied widely—from an average of fewer than 1 fine per extant court in the early fourteenth century to a peak of more than 11 fines per extant session in 1340–45. Despite these dramatic swings, women always dominated the Brigstock ale industry. The data for Iver are even more persuasive because fluctuations in number of fines levied failed to correlate with fluctuations in number of women active in the industry. Between 1332 and 1349, women steadily gained a larger piece of the Iver ale market (from 23 percent of the business in 1332–35 to 33 percent in 1345–49). During this period, the average number of ale fines assessed per court fluctuated widely but did not match the steady gain in female brewing (average number of fines in 1332–35, 23; 1336–38, 35; 1341–45, 28; 1345–49, 11).

22. See Bennett, "Gender," pp. 43–57, 240–46, 298–305, for the economic histories of these three manors in the early fourteenth century. For a discussion of the many opportunities offered by a forest economy, see Jean R. Birrell, "The Forest Economy of the Honour of Tutbury in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," *University of Birmingham Historical Journal* 8 (1962): 114–34.

23. Joan Thirsk, "Industries in the Countryside," in *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England*, ed. F. J. Fisher (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 70–88.

24. In Brigstock, male brewing was too insignificant to merit the tracing of changes over time. In bread sales, however, female participation rose steadily from 21 percent of the market in the late thirteenth century to 83 percent of the market in the 1340s (Bennett, "Gender," p. 174). In Iver, female brewers, who controlled 23 percent of the market in the early 1330s held 33 percent of all ale sales by the late 1340s (p. 264). In Houghton, men controlled almost one-fifth of the ale market in the early fourteenth century but were much less active in the industry (7 percent) by the 1340s (p. 323).

25. The hypothesis that women's participation in commercial brewing was dependent upon household economic priorities accords well with the general rule that women's work in the rural family economy was more flexible and variable than men's work. See Tilly and Scott, *Women*, pp. 43–60. If this theoretical relationship between primary economic activities and involvement in commercial pursuits can be verified by further study, the easily retrievable data in medieval court rolls on commercial activities can provide basic indicators of rural economic structures. In other words, researchers could infer the labor intensity of a local economy by

examining the extent of male participation in commercial sales of bread and ale. Similarly, changes in the economic health of a single community could be traced through temporal shifts in male commercial activities. Clearly, then, the relationship between economic well-being, labor intensity of local economies, and gender differentiation in commercial activities has methodological implications that extend far beyond the confines of the history of the medieval ale-wife.

26. Many studies have shown that women who make significant economic contributions to their family economies gain considerable domestic power and prestige. See Ernestine Friedl, "The Position of Women: Appearance and Reality," *Anthropological Quarterly* 40 (1967): 97–108, and Stanley Chojnacki, "Dowries and Kinsmen in Early Renaissance Venice," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 5 (1975): 571–600. Because such benefits can clearly be significant and highly valued by women, they should not be neglected or belittled. But power associated with the private sphere commonly lacks the authority and breadth of public power. See Rayna R. Reiter, "Men and Women in the South of France: Public and Private Domains," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York, 1975), pp. 252–82.

27. See Bennett, "Gender," pp. 191–97. All adult males in medieval England were obliged to join tithing groups, whose members were mutually responsible in court for each others' behavior. As we shall see, some exceptions to the legal disabilities of women did occur; women in Brigstock were sometimes accepted as personal pledges. Some scholars have found occasional references to women serving in official positions (as ale-tasters); see Rodney H. Hilton, "Women," p. 105. As a rule, women accounted for only about 10 percent of all nonbrewing entries in these manorial courts. See Bennett, "Gender," p. 330.

28. Of these ten major ale-wives, six only appeared in court on one or two occasions not related to brewing; they always appeared with their husbands.

29. For examples of such cases, see the Montagu Collection in the Northamptonshire Record Office, Box 365, file 31, courts for 21 September 1318 and 12 October 1318 (Margery accused of slandering Richard Boys; she initially refused to answer the accusation without her husband, who was impleaded jointly with her); file 35, court for 28 November 1325 (Margery accused of slandering Galfridus Solar by calling him a thief; she refused to respond without her husband, who again was sued jointly with her).

30. Only 9 percent of Iver's males held public office, but 20 percent of the men involved in commercial brewing achieved official power. Of Iver's 72 officeholders, 44 (61 percent) sold ale. As a rule, officeholders were especially committed brewers; they averaged 8.6 fines (against a 5.4 average for all male brewers).

31. Bennett, "Gender," pp. 192–227.

32. As techniques of ale production changed in subsequent centuries, women would be slowly excluded from the industry. The most notable development was the inclusion of hops into the brewing process in the late fourteenth century. The new drink (called beer) lasted longer without souring. Christopher Dyer has traced a slow professionalization of the ale-beer industry on the estates of the bishopric of Worcester that coincides with the hops additive. In his brief survey, he fails to link professionalization with changing techniques, but the connection probably existed. Dyer, unfortunately, presents no information on the male/female composition of the ale-beer industry on the Worcester estates. Christopher Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 346–49. Alice Clark, however, has shown how women in the seventeenth century were slowly excluded from the beer industry

as it capitalized and centralized (*Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* [1919; rpt. London, 1982], pp. 221–33).

33. It is worth noting in this context that the Iver data indicate that male brewers were more committed to the industry than were female brewers. Males were twice as likely as females to become major brewers (defined in Iver as those receiving five or more citations).

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