Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside

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Villagers in medieval England lived in a very public world.[1] Bound together by nucleated settlements, common fields, and shared lordships, medieval villagers cooperated with their neighbors in coordinating work and government, monitoring courtship and marriage, and exchanging land and labor. Community interest and control extended even to the most private of acts—sexual relations and marriage.[2] As a result, the notion of a public sphere for males and a private sphere for females was much less important to medieval peasants than it was to the middle class of the nineteenth century. A dichotomy between private wives and public husbands was certainly embedded in the households of the medieval countryside, but it was an ideal, not a real dichotomy. Women were never thoroughly isolated from the public life of medieval villages because their daily activities brought them into regular contact with neighbors, officers, laborers, traders, and the like.

A clear but relatively fluid sexual division of labor also promoted the public activity of medieval countrywomen. Skilled or heavy work away from the domestic croft was usually undertaken by men, and women took responsibility for a wide variety of smaller tasks centered on the household.[3] Household duties did not, however, isolate peasant women. On the one hand, women regularly assisted men in planting and harvesting. Whenever agricultural work required additional laborers, women left their tasks around the croft and joined their fathers, husbands, and brothers in the fields. On the other hand, women's work around the croft was often more public than private. As dairymaids, poulterers, gardeners, bakers, and brewers, medieval countrywomen not only supplied the needs of their own households but also produced mar-

ketable surpluses. The enforcement records of the assize of bread and ale leave no doubt, for example, that women were some of the most active of commercial bakers and brewers in the countryside.[4] Rural women and men worked with equal vigor to support their households and relied with equal intensity upon each other's labor. The private idealization of the economically inactive "angel in the house" that so strongly characterized the Victorian middle class had no place in the rural household economy of the Middle Ages.

Neither the public nature of life in the medieval countryside nor the economic importance of women's work, however, assured that public power and authority were shared equally by the sexes. Power, defined as "the ability to act effectively on persons or things . . . [in ways] not of right allocated to individuals," can be best assessed for medieval countrypeople through their landholding, legal, and social activities.[5] All medieval peasants did not hold land, were not treated equivalently by their courts, and were not socially active to the same extent and degree. Still, the most effective members of rural communities were legally competent and socially active landholders. Defined in these terms, power was most readily acquired by men, but it was not denied to women. In contrast, authority, defined as "recognized and legitimized power," was strictly reserved for males. Women never served as rural officers and were also excluded from the formal associations that bound men together into a political community. In the villages of medieval England, political action brought sanctioned power, social prestige, and personal profit, benefits available only to men.

The experiences of the medieval peasantry are set forth in the records of courts held by manorial lords. Manorial courts usually required the attendance of all tenants at meetings every three weeks and oversaw a wide variety of local matters, including inheritances, land conveyances, trespasses, assaults, disputes, and petty thefts. These courts were rural as well as seigneurial institutions. Convened by a lord's authority but managed by peasant officers, manorial courts blended the seigneurial need for control with the local need for community regulation and mingled the lord's law with local custom. These local forums differed from modern courts in familiarity (most peasants probably knew their courts as well as they knew their churches), use (most contacts in manorial courts involved cooperation rather than the conflict we associate with modern legal action), and form (business was conducted by laypeople who normally acted without the aid of lawyers). Where manorial court rolls survive in long and complete series, they provide unparalleled insights into the public affairs of preindustrial rural communities.[6]

The use of such records to study the access of rural women to public

power and authority presents, however, two basic problems. First, private influence cannot be traced in court records, and no other sources survive to counterbalance the public focus of court rolls with information about private ideals, aspirations, and actions. Because both male and female peasants were illiterate, they have left no diaries or memoirs that describe their personal hopes and visions. The peasantry was generally despised by the literate minority, and its portrayal in contemporary literature is, at best, highly suspect. The private attitudes and activities of medieval countryfolk are, as a result, hidden from historical view.[7] Still, given the public nature of life in the medieval countryside, there can be no doubt that public activities were important in medieval villages and that the ability of women to act publicly was one significant component of their lives. Neighborliness was vital to rural living, and those whose public options enabled them to be better neighbors accrued not only power but possibly also authority. Manorial court rolls offer only a partial view of medieval rural society, but it is a view focused on essential activities.[8]

Second, since court rolls are best used in studies of specific localities, their findings can be extended to other areas and times only with the greatest care and caution. This essay uses the 549 courts extant for the manor of Brigstock (in Rockingham Forest, Northamptonshire) between 1287 and 1348 to examine the access of women in that community to public power and authority.[9] Were the experiences of women in Brigstock typical of all English countrywomen? Because no single community can represent fully the extraordinary diversity of economy, settlement, and custom found in the English medieval countryside, none was "typical" of all others. And because the history of rural women is a relatively new field in medieval studies, little comparable research is available. Nevertheless, comparison of the Brigstock data with information drawn from the archives of two other manors—Iver, a pastoral community in Buckinghamshire, and Houghton-cum-Wyton, an open-field, mixed farming manor in Huntingdonshire—suggests that gender relations in Brigstock followed a pattern broadly characteristic of most rural communities before the plague.[10]

In these communities, then, public power was less available to women than to men, and public authority was, essentially, a male preserve. No matter what private pressures and influences countrywomen might have mustered to influence events in their communities, they were less able than men to exert formal and public power. This finding is, perhaps, unsurprising, since women have been observed in many societies—urban as well as rural, modern as well as medieval—to be excluded from the formal exercise of power. What distinguishes the experiences of medieval countrywomen, however, is that their gender only indirectly affected access to many types of public power but definitively determined the extent of their participation in public authority. Although rural women, under certain circumstances, acquired many attributes commonly associated with the public power of men, they never attained public authority. Women held land, pursued legal pleas, and forged complex networks of friendship with fellow villagers, but politics remained a male affair.

ACCESS TO PUBLIC POWER in Brigstock was determined as much by household position as by gender. Because of their sex, all women faced obstacles to landholding, legal competency, and social activity that were unknown to men, but these obstacles reflected a presumption of household dependency more than gender distinctions. In rural communities such as Brigstock, the full range of landholding, legal, and social options was reserved for householders (including most males) and was less available to their dependents (including most females). Those men, however, who were not full householders (adolescent sons, bachelors, and retired fathers) were less publicly powerful than male householders, just as those women who were freed of household dependency (widows and, in some measure, adolescent daughters) more nearly emulated the public activities of men. Public power, in short, was most available to heads of households. Since most households were headed by males, an assumption of publicly powerful males (i.e., householders) and publicly passive females (i.e., wives and daughters) underlay the distribution of power in the countryside. These gender distinctions, however, not only were secondary to household status but also were moderated by the many household positions that fit poorly the presumption of male power and female dependency.

Because of the influence of household position upon access to public power in Brigstock, women's power waxed, waned, and waxed again over the course of the female life cycle. During adolescence, as young people of both sexes gradually detached themselves from parental authority in anticipation of marriage, the public opportunities of young women roughly matched those of young men. Consider the adolescent experiences of Cristina Penifader and her future brother-in-law, Henry Kroyl junior. Cristina Penifader first appeared in the court of Brigstock in 1312 when she began to accumulate property, while she was still unmarried, from her father. In 1312, he gave her future control of a plot and croft that he had purchased; in 1314 he granted her the use of a full virgate of meadow; in 1316, he gave her four butts of land valuable enough to merit the high entry fine of two shillings.[11] When she needed a personal pledge or legal assistor during these years, Cristina Penifader turned sometimes

to her father, but she was sufficiently well connected in the community to seek such aid, as she usually did, from other men to whom she was presumably not related. She was also, by virtue of her propertied status, a suitor of the Brigstock court, obliged to attend all its meetings unless properly excused. By the time Cristina Penifader married Richard Power in 1317, she was a competent landholder, an experienced court suitor, and a socially active member of her community.[12] The experiences of Henry Kroyl junior during his unmarried years were quite similar. In the three years that preceded his marriage to Agnes Penifader in 1319, he accumulated property through gifts from his parents (acquiring parcels of land in six separate transactions), relied often, but not exclusively, upon his father for legal assistance, and paid suit to the Brigstock court.[13]

Cristina Penifader and Henry Kroyl junior belonged to the more privileged sector of a heterogeneous rural community, but their experiences indicate the many ways in which young people—of both sexes and from both relatively rich and relatively poor households—enjoyed access to public power in early fourteenth-century Brigstock.[14] Young people often established independent economic reserves by acquiring land or saving wages, and daughters, like sons, could hold, sell, and buy land without restriction.[15] Adolescents of both sexes were also treated by the Brigstock court as legally responsible adults who could be trusted as landholders, were liable as criminals, and were competent as suitors.[16] Social experiences were similarly parallel, as both young women and young men slowly expanded their horizons while still maintaining close ties with their parents.[17] The public powers of adolescent daughters and sons were certainly distinguishable; sons came to court more readily than daughters, their economic privileges (including preference in inheritance and better wages) assured them of greater success in establishing economic autonomy, and their networks of friends and associates were usually larger and more diverse than the networks of their sisters. Still, adolescent daughters and sons in Brigstock enjoyed fundamentally similar access to public power even if sons more quickly and more easily exploited the options available to them.

Marriage sharply divided the public power of the sexes. It dramatically expanded men's access to power derived through landholding, legal competency, and social action, and it just as dramatically limited the access of women to the same activities. When such women as Cristina Penifader married, they lost many opportunities they had known as adolescents. A wife no longer enjoyed economic independence; her lands were merged into the conjugal property and could not be conveyed or sold without her husband's concurrence (a husband's lands were not similarly encumbered).[18] A wife also lost legal competency; she no longer owed court suit (her husband did it for her), and she no longer invariably took personal responsibility for her own actions (her husband could be implicated for her crimes and pleas).[19] And whereas marriage brought men an expansion of social opportunities and decreased reliance upon family, it had the opposite effect upon women; the court associations of wives were distinguished from those of all other adults (whether male or female) by their small size and heavy focus upon kin.[20] The public powers of women and men were most distinct when they lived together as wives and husbands.

Widowhood and old age brought a new equivalency in the public power of the sexes in Brigstock. The extant records preclude the study of male widowhood, but many men clearly began to exercise their public options less vigorously as they aged. Without formally retiring, they dispersed some landed property among their grown children, they less frequently attended court or brought matters to the court's attention, and they associated less intensely and less widely with others in the community. The means of exercising public power were not closed to aging men, but they nevertheless seem to have activated those means much less commonly than they had done when they were younger.[21] For women, however, the later years of life often brought an expansion, rather than a contraction, in both the availability and the exercise of public power. When widows took over the households left by their husbands, they acquired public opportunities that surpassed those of all other women. Widows freely traded and sold their personal properties, and many managed in addition to circumvent the custodial restrictions placed upon the "free bench" lands assigned, from the conjugal property, for their use. More than daughters or wives, widows most emulated the participation of men in the Brigstock land market—independently trading, exchanging, and selling small parcels of property.[22] Widows were also distinguished by their legal actions. They, like daughters, owed suit to the Brigstock court and answered complaints and pursued litigation without the *couverture* of a male. In addition, they, like husbands, could be legally liable for the actions and problems of their dependents.[23] The social experiences of widows betray a similar breadth of social activity and power. Although the court associations of most women were characterized by a strong focus upon kin, the associations of widows more closely matched the male pattern of wide and varied reliance upon neighbors as well as kin.[24]

As an adolescent daughter or widow, then, a woman in early fourteenth-century Brigstock faced many more public opportunities and responsibilities than she encountered as a married woman. Her experiences suggest that the conjugal households of the medieval countryside had a

contradictory effect upon the sexual distribution of power. Conjugality, by creating an expectation of powerful male householders and powerless female dependents, certainly played a crucial role in defining gender. Norms of female and male behavior in the medieval countryside drew heavily upon the private subordination of wives to their husbands. Femaleness was defined by the submissiveness of wives who were expected to defer to their husbands in both private and public. A popular saying advised, "Let not the hen crow before the rooster."[25] Maleness was defined by the private authority of husbands who, as householders, controlled most domestic and community matters. The distinction between a private, female sphere and a public, male sphere received its fullest elaboration in the nineteenth century, but a dichotomy of private wives and public husbands was already firmly established in the households of medieval communities such as Brigstock.

The public-private distinction in the medieval countryside, however, applied more to husbands and wives than to men and women. At the same time that conjugality defined gender, it also moderated the severity of gender distinctions by sustaining many domestic circumstances that did not accord with the expectation of male power and female powerlessness. As long as adolescent daughters had to prepare for independent marriage and widows had to take over the households left by their husbands, power wielded by women, no matter how anomalous, had to be tolerated. Despite the public reticence expected of wives, the access of women to public power varied enormously, according to whether "be she mayde or wydwe or elles wyf."[26]

IN CONTRAST to the relatively fluid and wide dispersion of public power in medieval rural communities, public authority, or legitimated power, was more rigidly and more narrowly distributed. Medieval communities like Brigstock were, perhaps, overorganized and overgoverned. Local order was preserved through peace-keeping groups whose members were mutually responsible for each others' behavior. Legal judgments were enforced through a system of sureties or pledges, who guaranteed that persons would meet court-ordered obligations. Governance was maintained through a wide variety of officers who served either manor or village. In Brigstock, reeves and bailiffs supervised manorial operations, afeerors determined the fines assessed against offenders, jurors judged disputes and claims, chief pledges managed the tithings, messors oversaw harvest operations, and aletasters ensured that ale sold in the community was sound, well measured, and properly priced. The authority that could

be obtained through political action—as tithing members, as pledges, and as officers—was available only to men.

The basic peace-keeping system of medieval England, the frankpledge or tithing, never included women. These groups, originally containing only ten persons each, were responsible for bringing their members to court to answer for crimes or offenses. If a tithing, headed by a chief pledge, failed to produce an errant member, it was fined. This system of mutual responsibility was carefully maintained through most of the English countryside. In Brigstock, annual views of frankpledge fined those illegally outside tithings, inducted new members, and considered the chief pledges' presentments of offenses against the peace. With very few exceptions, all men in England, both free and unfree, were expected to join tithings at twelve years of age, but women, considered to be legal dependents of their householders, never joined these groups.[27]

Women were also barred from a variety of legal actions that enabled men to solidify friendships and to enlarge political influence. Men frequently assisted one another in court, acting as attorneys who stood in for absent litigants, as essoiners who brought other suitors' excuses for failing to attend court, and especially as pledges who guaranteed that a person would fulfill a stipulated legal obligation. Almost all persons judged liable by the Brigstock court to pay a fine, perform an assigned task, or answer a specific plea had to produce a personal pledge, who promised that the legal obligation would be met. If such persons defaulted, their pledges were liable for a fine or other punishment. The private arrangements that accompanied pledging are unknown, but most people probably pledged not for remuneration in cash or goods but for ties of friendship and mutuality. The political ramifications of pledging are best illustrated by the fact that the people who most actively served as pledges in Brigstock were, as in most medieval villages, among the wealthiest and most influential members of the community.[28] Although men of all social ranks and ages were accepted as pledges by the Brigstock court, women were rarely allowed to act in this capacity; of the thousands of pledges recorded in the rolls of the court, only forty-six were women. Brigstock was unusual in this respect; on most medieval manors, no female pledges were ever accepted by the court.[29] In Brigstock, as elsewhere, women never served their neighbors as either attorneys or essoiners.

The Brigstock court yielded the right of pledging to women only in unusual and restricted circumstances. Most female pledges were widows; of the twenty-four women accepted by the court as pledges, at least fourteen were widows, and the unknown marital status of the others raises

the strong possibility that they were also widowed heads of households.[30] Indeed, the major status requirement for acceptance of a female pledge was widowhood; women from the various social strata of Brigstock (as shown by the activities of their husbands or other males presumably related to them) acted in this capacity.[31] Most female pledges also acted within a restricted sphere, pledging only for the petty liabilities of kin. The extremely high rate of familial pledging by female pledges (twenty-six cases of forty-six, or 57 percent) was matched by a tendency for such sureties to guarantee the payment of the small fines levied for minor crimes (thirty-eight cases) or baking infractions (two cases). The few women who served as pledges in other, more momentous legal transactions were personally involved in other aspects of the case.[32] Clearly the occasional pledging privileges extended to women in Brigstock responded to the practical reality that widows, as heads of households, had to accept responsibility for their dependents.

In the end, female pledging was so limited that it lacked the political ramifications that it carried for men. Any man could serve as a pledge—adolescent sons as well as householders, laborers as well as landholders. Furthermore, men used pledging both to aid family members in minor distress and to form political alliances. Standing as a surety not only for petty matters but also for the weightier obligations involved in land transactions, contracts, and inheritances, Henry Kroyl junior built up a complex political network of obligation and reciprocity that involved literally hundreds of his neighbors. He was unusually active, but most of his brothers and brothers-in-law also pledged on a fair number of occasions for their friends and neighbors in the Brigstock court.[33] Of the seven women in their familial generation, only one ever acted as a pledge; Alice Kroyl pledged once, for a child guilty of a minor field infraction.[34] For Henry Kroyl junior, pledging was an important and commonly used political tool. For his female kin, pledging was a rare obligation that offered no political benefit.

The public authority of women was severely restricted by their inability to form political associations with others through tithings, pledgings, or other forms of legal assistance. The exclusion of women from public office, however, constituted the major obstacle to female authority in medieval rural communities. The method of selecting bailiffs, reeves, messors, aletasters, affeerors, and jurors is unknown. Court records simply note that a particular person was chosen (*electi est*) to a particular office, without specifying either electors or selection procedures. The criteria for selection, however, are much clearer; most rural officials were married males who possessed substantial landholdings.[35] Not all men served their communities as officers, but only men did so.[36]

The official career of Henry Kroyl junior of Brigstock again provides a pertinent example. During his adolescent years, Henry Kroyl junior began to build a political network both through his tithing and through assisting others in court as a pledger, essoiner, and attorney. He did not embark upon a distinguished career of official service, however, until after his marriage. Active in the local court since 1316, Henry Kroyl junior first served as an officer in September 1319, just a few months after his marriage to Agnes Penifader. As adolescents, young men participated in the basic political organizations of rural communities such as Brigstock; as married householders, they gained the additional opportunity of controlling political processes through local offices. Those men who were most able to seize this opportunity came from the elite of their communities. Both Henry Kroyl junior and his brother John Kroyl held extensive properties in Brigstock, and both served often as officers. Their brothers, Robert and William, possessed much more modest landholdings and never served as local officers. The normal prerequisites for officeholding included not only male sex but also married status and comparative wealth.

Official service was not an unmitigated benefit. In addition to time lost from other pursuits, officers in Brigstock were liable for fines for dereliction of duty and attacks from disgruntled villagers. As a result, some attempted to avoid official duties, as did William ad Stagnum, who paid two shillings in 1314 to be excused from serving as reeve.[37] Attempts to avoid office were rare, however, because official activity not only signaled privileged status but also enhanced privilege. On the one hand, officers used their authority to personal advantage, taking gifts, arranging lucrative contracts, and using the lord's labor services to work private lands.[38] On the other hand, officers also worked together to control the poorer and more marginal members of their communities. Rural officers decided what pleas would be disallowed, what crimes would be ignored, and what customs would govern land use and devolution. Their decisions on such matters reflected the concerns of a male elite working to control marginal males, poorer households, and women.[39]

The clerks of manorial courts never noted any protests by women about their lack of political opportunity or any formal efforts by men to exclude women from political matters. Instead, the relegation of politics to men was likely accepted as natural by both sexes. Just as medieval people expected wives to be submissive and husbands to be dominant, so they expected women to accept the government of men. Although it is reasonable to suppose that countrywomen exercised some informal say over political processes, such influence cannot belie the basic power held by the men who controlled rural politics.[40] Informal influence is, of

course, inherently limited. It usually exists only to compensate for a lack of formal authority and not only lacks authority but also easily erodes. Moreover, public institutions in the medieval countryside were so highly articulated that the ability of women to influence public matters informally was necessarily curtailed. In communities where all adult males belonged to tithings, where community matters were regulated with numerous by-laws enforced by numerous officers, and where triweekly seigneurial courts required the attendance of all tenants, political life was so active and varied that informal influence was correspondingly limited. Indeed, even in the highly unlikely event that some sort of equilibrium existed in rural communities between male political authority and female informal influence, that balance would have been destroyed by the advantages that those men who wielded formal authority exercised in the world beyond the village. The same men who helped govern a community and run its court also acted as brokers with the outside world—dealing with manorial officials, negotiating with royal tax collectors, and testifying at county courts.[41] Because they lacked political authority, medieval women stood in relation to the men of their villages as those men stood to their manorial lords; the medieval world was a hierarchical world with peasant women at the bottom.

THE EXPERIENCES of medieval countrywomen suggest that political authority was the first sector of public action to be denied to women. Rural women were, under certain circumstances, permitted to hold land, pursue legal claims, and form public associations with neighbors and friends, but they were not allowed to participate in matters political. Such patterns indicate that women were, for convenience's sake, allowed to exercise certain forms of power but that such power was under no circumstances allowed to become sanctioned authority.

Women's exclusion from political authority was strictly maintained despite its legal inconsistencies and practical inconveniences. Unmarried or widowed tenants were as obliged as male tenants to attend all sessions of the manorial court and to observe local by-laws, but they were never—despite their acceptance of the legal responsibilities of landholders—eligible for political authority. Because some of these female landholders were as wealthy as the males who served as reeves, aletasters, jurors, and the like, it seems that their sex was the major barrier to political authority. Unmarried and widowed women also often lived outside the control of a male householder who could be trusted to bring them to court for petty crimes and offenses. Such spinsters and widows, however, were never inducted into tithings to ensure that they kept the peace; again, their sex seems to have been the excluding factor. Similarly, the acceptance of some female pledges demonstrates the legal sufficiency of such actions, but custom limited the political impact of female pledging by only infrequently allowing widows to pledge for their dependents. Moreover, the exclusion of women from the office of aletaster—despite the fact that they, as brewers, were the most knowledgeable and skilled candidates—again illustrates the importance of barring women from authoritative positions. When it came to extending political authority to women, legal precedents and practical requirements had no importance; politics was the business of men.

F. W. Maitland's summary of the public functions of women under the common law in the thirteenth century applies just as well to women under the customary law of communities like Brigstock: "In the camp, at the council board, on the bench, in the jury box there is no place for them."[42] Indeed, the extension of public power to women when convenient, and their exclusion from political authority no matter how inconvenient, might apply to medieval Englishwomen generally. All women, regardless of rank or class, were effectively excluded from formal political activity in medieval England. Countrywomen never served as reeves, townswomen never acted as mayors, and gentlewomen never went to Parliament to advise their king. All these women, however, especially when widowed, could aspire to public power, not only as heads of households, but also as controllers of the economic resources left by their husbands. Medieval Englishwomen, in short, were often powerful, but they were never authoritative.

Notes

1. This essay draws upon material discussed at greater length in my book *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague* (New York, 1987). Readers might particularly wish to consult chapters 4 (on adolescence), 5 (on marriage), and 6 (on widowhood) for specific data and analyses that support the generalization presented here.

2. Manorial lords, for example, often levied fines not only for the marriage of their bondswomen (merchets) but also for sexual activity by unmarried women (leyrwytes) and the birth of illegitimate children (childwytes).

3. These distinctions were reflected in contemporary literature. In the late medieval "Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband," for example, the husband spent his days plowing, while the wife watched children, cleaned house, prepared meals, brewed, baked, cared for poultry and dairy animals, made butter and cheese, and worked wool and flax into cloth. See the printed edition of this poem in *Reliquiae Antiquae*, ed. Thomas Wright and James Orchard Halliwell, vol. 2 (London,

1845), pp. 196–99. For discussions of the sexual division of labor in the medieval countryside, see chapter 5 of my book and Barbara Hanawalt, "Peasant Women's Contribution to the Home Economy in Late Medieval England," in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 3–19; Rodney Hilton, "Women in the Village," in *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Rodney Hilton (Oxford, 1975), pp. 95–110; Christopher Middleton, "The Sexual Division of Labor in Feudal England," *New Left Review* 113–14 (1979):147–68; Michael Roberts, "Sickles and Scythes: Women's Work and Men's Work at Harvest Time," *History Workshop* 7 (1979):3–29.

4. The extent of female commercial brewing varied widely, but rural women were always active in the industry during the Middle Ages. In early fourteenth-century Brigstock, for example, women completely dominated the trade (men accounted for only 1 percent of the ale amercements levied); in Houghton-cum-Wyton during the same decades, men accrued only 11 percent of ale amercements; in Iver 71 percent of assize infractions were cited against males. The importance of commercial brewing in the lives of many countrywomen is illustrated by the fact that more than one-third of the women identified in the court rolls of Brigstock were cited on at least one occasion for selling ale. See my essay "The Village Ale-Wife: Women and Brewing in Fourteenth-Century England," in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial Europe*, pp. 20–36.

5. Both this definition of power and the following definition of authority come from Peggy Sanday's discussion of M. G. Smith's definitions in "Female Status in the Public Domain," in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, 1974), p. 190.

6. For a discussion of the uses and limits of court roll evidence, see my article "Spouses, Siblings, and Surnames: Reconstructing Families from Medieval Village Court Rolls," *Journal of British Studies* 23 (1983):26–46.

7. The culture and attitudes of the peasantry were probably deeply influenced by elite traditions. As judged by R. H. Hilton, one of the leading scholars of rural society, "in so far as one has evidence at all, the ruling ideas of medieval peasants seem to have been the ideas of the rulers of society as transmitted to them in innumerable sermons" (*English Peasantry*, p. 16). If this was the case, medieval peasants accepted a cultural tradition whose ideas about women were, at worst, misogynistic and, at best, ambivalent. For two excellent introductions to elite attitudes toward women, see Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 9–34, and Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision* (New York, 1976), pp. 181–212.

8. The study of rural women includes an intellectual tradition that purports to describe a balance in rural societies between female informal power and male formal power. The examples proffered to support such arguments are highly controversial and, in the opinion of this author, unconvincing. See especially Susan Carol Rogers, "Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance: A Model of Female/Male Interaction in Peasant Society," *American Ethnologist* 2 (1975):727–56, and Martine Segalen, *Love and Power in the Peasant Family*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago, 1983). The most recent application of such theories in a medieval context can be found in Ivan Illich, *Gender* (New York, 1982). See

criticisms of his arguments in *Feminist Issues* 3 (1983), especially the article by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Vernacular Sexism: An Anthropological Response to Ivan Illich," pp. 28–37.

9. These rolls are deposited in the Montagu Collection (Boxes X364A, X364B, and X365) at the Northamptonshire Record Office (hereinafter cited as NRO with the court date) and at the Public Record Office (hereinafter cited as PRO).

10. Local studies not only have a long and distinguished place in medieval rural historiography (as exemplified by estate studies and more recently, by studies of particular villages) but also are particularly suited to the sorts of anthropological enquiries that attend any study of gender relations. Detailed comparisons of women's experiences in Brigstock, Iver, and Houghton-cum-Wyton can be found in my book *Women in the Medieval English Countryside* The manorial records of Iver are deposited with the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society in Aylesbury and at St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle. The manorial records of Houghton-cum-Wyton are deposited in the British Library and at the PRO.

11. Virgates and semi-virgates were the standard holdings in Brigstock. Their precise acreage is unknown, but a virgate commonly covered from twenty to thirty acres of land. Butts, plots of irregular size and shape that remained after fields were divided into strips, were usually small parcels of land.

12. For Cristina Penifader's landholdings, see NRO, January 22, 1312, August 8, 1314 (land granted *ad opus*), and October (n.d.) 1316. Statements about the social horizons of Cristina Penifader and other Brigstock inhabitants are based partly upon network analysis, a system of charting and analyzing each individual's contacts in court. For a full explanation of this complex methodology and its findings, see the appendix and appropriate chapters of my book and my article "The Tie That Binds: Peasant Marriages and Families in Late Medieval England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15 (1984):111–29. Social activities have also been estimated by tracing patterns of pledging, that is, from the identity of persons chosen to be a surety in court. The findings from this analysis, which are relatively straightforward, are summarized in the notes to illustrate the social distinctions described in the text. Cristina Penifader required legal assistance on eleven occasions before her marriage; her father came to her aid in four instances For her obligation to attend court, see general essoins (or excuses) offered in such courts as NRO, August 24, 1315, and May 26, 1317.

13. For premarital acquisitions of land by Henry Kroyl junior, see NRO, November 18, 1316, April 14, 1317, May 5, 1317, May 26, 1317, February 4, 1319, and May 31, 1319. For a full discussion of his premarital court network, see "The Tie That Binds." Henry Kroyl junior required legal assistance on eleven occasions before his marriage; his father provided the needed aid in eight instances.

14. For the criteria used to identify adolescents in Brigstock, see pp. 73–75 of my book. As in most rural communities in medieval England, a core group of villagers dominated social life in Brigstock, enjoying both economic privilege (holding semi-virgates or more) and political power (controlling local offices). The fathers of both Cristina Penifader and Henry Kroyl junior belonged to this privileged elite. Since no landholding records are extant for preplague Brigstock,

aggregate assessments of social rank in this essay are based upon officeholding (individuals who held offices or were contemporaneously associated with 'officeholders—usually fathers or husbands—have been deemed upper rank).

15. The landholding activities of adolescents in Brigstock probably best exemplify the patterns characteristic of this life-cycle stage. First, adolescents were exceptionally active in the local land market; one-fourth of those cited in a sample of 779 conveyors or receivers of land were identified as sons or daughters of other villagers. Second, parents often assisted their children in gaining economic independence; seventeen daughters and twenty-seven sons directly received properties from their parents, and many other young people probably received land with parental assistance that cannot be traced (since parents who purchased lands for their children from third parties would not be mentioned in the legal conveyance of the property). Third, socioeconomic status did not clearly affect the access of adolescents to land; of the 128 adolescent recipients of land whose backgrounds could be traced, 66 were upper rank (with fathers who held local offices), and 62 were lower rank (with fathers who never served in official capacities). Fourth, adolescents freely controlled the properties they obtained on the land market; they seldom held properties that were leased, encumbered, or jointly possessed; they received properties using the legal forms that were employed by adults; and they freely transferred land without any hindrance. Fifth, daughters, although as competent to hold land as sons, were less likely to do so. One daughter conveyed or received land for every four sons who did so. It is worth noting that the active participation of young women and young men in the Brigstock land market represents, in a sense, only the tip of the economic iceberg, since many other economic opportunities (commercial work, employment as servants, and wage work) fostered the growth of economic autonomy during adolescence. Evidence from Iver and Houghton-cum-Wyton suggests that the economic activities of adolescents in Brigstock were not unusual. In Iver, eleven of twenty-nine traced adolescents controlled independent economic resources before marriage. In Houghton-cum-Wyton, daughters regularly paid their own marriage fines; the implication is that they had accumulated means before marriage. For an analysis of the connection between marriage fine payments and economic independence, see my article "Medieval Peasant Marriage: An Examination of Marriage License Fines in the *Liber Gersumarum*," in *Pathways to Medieval Peasants*, ed. J. A. Raftis (Toronto, 1981), pp. 193–246.

16. In a sample of two hundred civil pleas brought before the Brigstock court, sons accounted for thirty-nine defendants and plaintiffs (11 percent of all male litigants) and daughters appeared on seventeen occasions (constituting 20 percent of all female litigants). Although adolescents tended to be involved more in pleas of trespass than in pleas of debt or broken contract, they pursued litigation with forms indistinguishable from those used by full adults.

17. Pledging patterns exemplify the social ambivalence of young people in Brigstock. Young women and men were no longer children completely subsumed under the authority of their householders, but neither were they thoroughly independent. As a result, young people turned to family members for

assistance in meeting their court obligations far more often than did full adults, but they did not invariably do so. In the sample of civil pleas in Brigstock, for example, sons used familial pledges 39 percent of the time (versus the male norm of 13 percent), and daughters used familial pledges 33 percent of the time (versus the female norm of 24 percent).

18. In 1315, for example, the Brigstock court voided the land sale of Quena ad Crucem, declaring that "a wife's sale is nothing in the absence of her husband" ("vendicio illa nulla est de uxore aliter in absentia mariti sui"); NRO, March 20, 1315).

19. These legal changes were not based on a notion of marital reciprocity. Wives did not replace their husbands as court suitors, and they also did not join their husbands in pleas unless personally involved in the case. The experiences of Cristina Penifader illustrate how the change from unmarried adolescent to married wife affected the legal status of women. As an unmarried landholder, Cristina Penifader attended all court sessions or obtained an excuse for her absence. Last appearing as a suitor at the court of June 16, 1317, she married Richard Power in the following month, and he assumed all subsequent obligations for court attendance. For her last essoin, see NRO, June 16, 1317. For an essoin by Richard Power (for lands held by his wife), see NRO, December 4, 1319. While unmarried, Cristina Penifader was also capable of independent legal action. In 1316, she requested and received a court inquisition into her rights to a certain property (see NRO, October [n.d.] 1316). After marriage, she was usually accompanied in legal actions by her husband (see, for example, their joint dispute with Martin Penifader in NRO, June 11, 1344). In general, the legal status of wives under the customary laws of communities such as Brigstock closely paralleled the common-law status of wives. See Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, 2d ed., rev. S. F. C. Milsom, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1968), vol. 2, pp. 399–436.

20. The social shifts occasioned by marriage are discussed fully in "The Tie That Binds." One aggregate index of social activity is the extent to which a person relied upon family members for pledges (sureties required by the court for many legal obligations). In the Brigstock sample of crimes, women used familial pledges much more frequently than men (46 percent of all women guilty of crimes versus 20 percent of all men involved in either crimes or land transactions), but wives used familial pledges at an extremely high rate (75 percent of all wives cited for crimes used a familial pledge).

21. Henry Kroyl senior had a life that provides a particularly good example of this phenomenon because the marriage of his son Henry junior in 1319 clearly marked the beginning of his retirement. He had served his community as an officer on twenty-three occasions in the ten years prior to his son's marriage; although he lived for a decade after the marriage, he never again took on official responsibilities. His three land conveyances in the 1309–19 decade similarly contrast with the single transfer of property accomplished in his last ten years, as do the three disputes that went to litigation in the former period, as opposed to only one in the latter. Although Henry Kroyl senior remained an independent land-

holder until his death in 1329, he nevertheless slowly withdrew, as he aged, from the public life of Brigstock. For similar patterns seen in the careers of five other Brigstock men, see table 6.1 in my book.

22. The precise extent of free bench in Brigstock (whether one-third, one-half, or all of the conjugal holding) is unclear, but widows did hold their free bench for life (i.e., no automatic forfeiture accompanied remarriage). Since men were preferred in inheritance, free bench claims offered many women their best opportunities to obtain large properties; of the sixty people listed in the partial rental of Brigstock in 1319, eleven (18 percent) were women, of whom at least six were widows (and the unknown marital status of the remaining five women suggests that they, too, might have been widowed): see NRO, verso of roll for 1319. Although widows were technically only custodians of their free bench lands (enjoying use but not the right of alienation), they asserted full control over such holdings through a variety of techniques; 54 of the 106 widows identified in Brigstock participated in the local land market. Similarly, one-fourth of the widows identified in Iver brought properties to their local land market (the information on widowhood in Houghton-cum-Wyton was too incomplete for analysis). Although some widows in both Brigstock and Iver used the land market to convey properties to children, others transferred lands outside their families.

23. In 1299, e.g., Letia Fox paid a fine "pro Dulce serviente sua et pro eadem": see PRO, SC 2/194/65, court for May 29, 1299. To take an example from Iver, Katrina, the widow of William Pees, paid a fine in 1337 because she had not prevented her son from fishing illegally; see item 128/53 in the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society holdings, m. 17, court for May 7, 1337.

24. The peculiar features of widow's social activities can best be seen in pledging patterns. In proffering pledges in the criminal cases sampled, for example, widows used familial pledges 18 percent of the time; men had exactly the same rate of familial pledging, but 75 percent of wives' pledges and 54 percent of daughters' pledges were family members. See table 6.7 in my book.

25. Quoted by Shulamith Shahar in *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London, 1983), p. 89.

26. Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Knight's Tale," l. 313. See F. N. Robinson, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Boston, 1933), p. 32.

27. William Alfred Morris, *The Frankpledge System* (New York, 1910). Maitland suggested that women were not included in tithings because "every woman is in the mainpast of some man" (Pollock and Maitland, *English Law*, vol. 1, p. 482).

28. The informal arrangements that accompanied pledging are unknown. Sometimes officers acted as pledges, and pledges were probably sometimes paid for their services, but usually pledging was performed as an unremunerated favor. See Martin Pimsler, "Solidarity in the Medieval Village? The Evidence of Personal Pledging at Elton, Huntingdonshire," *Journal of British Studies* 17 (1977):1–11. Pimsler also noted both "the frequency with which men in positions of responsibility acted as sureties" and the fact that pledges "tended to come from the wealthier segment of the village" (pp. 6–8). See also R. M. Smith, "Kin and

Neighbors [illegible] a Thirteenth-Century Suffolk Community," *Journal of Family History* 4 (1[illegible]):223–24 in particular.

29. Pimsler (in "Solidarity?" n. 18) reports one instance of female pledging in Elton but suggests that the scribe may have made an error. He also cites evidence from Wakefield to suggest that women on that manor could serve as pledges as their husbands died. In most manorial courts, however, no women served as pledges (the court records of Iver and Houghton-cum-Wyton, for example, include no instances of pledging by women).

30. One woman who acted as a pledge was cited as being married, but the dating of that instance in the plague year of 1348 lends a suspicion to the attribution that cannot be verified because the 1348 courts are the last series extant for Brigstock for several decades. The other nine female pledges were cited simply by forename and surname, and their marital status cannot be reconstructed from other sources. Widows, however, were more likely than either daughters or wives to be cited by court clerks by name alone, with no marital attribution.

31. Of the twenty-two female pledges whose social backgrounds could be traced, twelve were of upper rank (associated with officeholding males) and ten were of lower rank.

32. Emma Pote, Alice Avice, and Strangia Tulke were the original holders of the lands whose acquisition by others prompted their pledging activities. Alice Somonor was a joint party with her son in the court plea that generated her pledge for his future attendance.

33. Henry Kroyl junior assisted others in court (acting primarily as a pledge but also as an essoiner and attorney) on 245 occasions; only 40 of these assists were rendered to known family members. The figures for other male members of his generation of Kroyls and Penifaders are as follows (figure in parentheses indicates assists to family members): John Kroyl, 159 (16); William Kroyl, none; Robert Kroyl, 13 (2); Robert Penifader, 24 (8); Henry Penifader, 46 (15); William Penifader, 29 (14).

34. NRO, September 18, 1348.

35. The marriage qualification in Brigstock was implicit but clear. First, men explicitly identified by court clerks as sons rarely acted as officers. Second, of the four males in Brigstock whose premarital careers could be traced, none served in offices as bachelors, and all assumed official responsibilities during their married years. Edwin DeWindt's careful study of jurors in Holywell-cum-Needingworth led him to conclude that most jurors were tenants at least thirty years old; most must certainly also have been married by that age. See his *Land and People in Holywell-cum-Needingworth* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 216–20. The connection between officeholding and wealth has been fully explored in many studies. See especially Anne DeWindt, "Peasant Power Structures in Fourteenth-Century King's Ripton," *Mediaeval Studies* 29 (1976):236–67.

36. The only exceptions, to this author's knowledge, occurred in Halesowen, where female aletasters were elected on a few occasions in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. See Hilton, "Women in the Village," pp. 105–106. A few late medieval instances of women serving in the parochial office of church-

warden have also been found. See Annie Abrams, *English Life and Manners in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1913), p. 37.

37. NRO, January 3, 1314.

38. For a vivid example of private benefit taken from public office, see George Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (1941; repr., New York, 1970), pp. 301–302.

39. For a fine study of the social control wielded by officeholders, see Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Community Conflict and Social Control: Crime and Justice in the Ramsey Abbey Villages," *Mediaeval Studies* 39 (1977):402–23. One possible ramification for women in Brigstock was the underreporting of male violence against women in the community; see chapter 2 of my book.

40. Probably the most outstanding example of a rural woman who exercised informal power is the exceptional case of Agnes Sadeler, who was cited as one of the leaders of the Romsley rebellion of 1386. Still, her case reflects more the allowance made for women in protests than the everyday informal influence of women. For a discussion of the special license allowed women in times of disruption and chaos, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), pp. 124–51.

41. The fundamental limitations on the informal power exercised by rural women are explored in Rayna Reiter's "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.

42. Pollock and Maitland, *English Law*, vol. 1, p. 485.

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