

Spouses, Siblings and Surnames: Reconstructing Families From Medieval Village Court Rolls

JUDITH M. BENNETT

Advocates of the “new social history” have buttressed their efforts to recreate the past lives of ordinary people with concepts, models, and quantitative methods taken from the social sciences. These new approaches have allowed scholars to extract vivid and dynamic reconstructions of past human experiences from the dry folios of civil and ecclesiastical registers. Their successes, as exemplified by the many publications of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, have focused largely on the demographic and familial histories of the early modern era.¹ The manipulation of parish listings of baptisms, marriages, and burials is now a fairly precise science that has taught us much (and will doubtless teach us more) about the daily lives of common people and their families in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. But the tracing into the past of the social, familial, and demographic characteristics of the English people need not start abruptly with the auspicious advent of parish registers in 1538. Indeed, we can only hope to trace the origins of fundamental features of Tudor-Stuart life (such as the pronounced tendency towards late marriage and the high incidence of persons who never married) if we develop accurate techniques for analyzing the pre-1500, pre-parish register materials at our disposal.² From the perspective of a medievalist, this work is clearly

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1981 Social Science History Association conference in Nashville, Tennessee.

¹Much of the work of the last few decades has been synthesized in the important new study by E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981). Peter Laslett's pioneering studies have generally focused on familial, rather than demographic issues, see *The World We Have Lost* (New York, 1965), *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations* (Cambridge, 1977), and *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1972). Research articles by members of the Cambridge Group can usually be found in the two journals *Local Population Studies* and *Population Studies*. An important methodological guide to parish register research is edited by E. A. Wrigley, *An Introduction to English Historical Demography* (London, 1966). Another collection edited by E. A. Wrigley, *Identifying People in the Past* (London, 1973), addresses the complex problems involved in record linkage.

²Although much amended by more recent work, the pioneering study of medieval demography is Josiah Cox Russell's *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque, NM, 1948). J. Hajnal first identified the unique characteristics of early modern

essential; most medieval people, quite simply, were peasants, and we shall better understand the histories of medieval parliaments, towns, and universities when we have successfully uncovered their rural underpinnings. As demonstrated more than four decades ago in the creative study of thirteenth-century English villagers by the sociologist George C. Homans, our best sources in this venture must be manorial records.³ Although manorial records differ radically from parish registers in both content and context, each provides, within its appropriate centuries, the best available materials for studying the past lives of ordinary people. Analysts of parish registers have their sanctioned and standardized systems for reconstructing historical experiences, but students of manorial records have produced, as yet, only methodological confusion and controversy.

The causes of this disorder are twofold. First, the social data found in the manorial records of the later Middle Ages have languished in the shadow, overwhelmed by the enormous interest and effort directed at rediscovering the societies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Comparison with parish registers has neither flattered nor benefitted the medieval sources. Parish registers excel at providing accurate demographic and genealogical data; manorial records are notoriously weak in both areas. Because many of the research questions that currently preoccupy social historians have been formed in parish register studies, the medieval sources have been inappropriately used to address demographic problems that they simply cannot solve. Not surprisingly, the tentative and often flawed results of such ill-fated efforts have failed to impress scholars accustomed to the systematic and reliable findings of parish register analysis.⁴ On a more fundamental level, it seems that early modernists have underestimated the historical value of the medieval sources. The manorial records of the late thirteenth, fourteenth, and early fifteenth centuries bear only a slight resemblance to their early modern descendants. Because local jurisdictions had begun a sharp decline by the time Henry Tudor acquired the English throne, Tudor-Stuart manorial courts represent only the skeletal remains of what had once been an active, full-blooded, communal body. Medievalists are not working with a barren source that early modernists, blessed with a plethora of parish

marriage in "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective," in *Population in History*, ed. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (London, 1965), pp. 101-43. Richard Smith has recently postulated—through reanalysis of the poll taxes of 1377, 1379, and 1381—that this unusual pattern might have existed as early as the fourteenth century: "Some Reflections on the Evidence for the Origins of the 'European Marriage Pattern' in England," in *The Sociology of the Family: New Directions for Britain*, ed. C. Harris (Sociological Review Monograph, 28) (Totowa, NJ, 1979), pp. 74-112.

³George C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941).

⁴For example, see Keith Wrightson's thoughtful critique, "Medieval Villagers in Perspective," *Peasant Studies*, 7 (1978), pp. 203-17.

register data, can afford to ignore. Instead, medieval manorial records, when taken on their own terms, provide unique and important insights into the rural world of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries.⁵

While the first problem arises from the dull reflection of medieval materials in the glaring light of Tudor-Stuart historiography, the second source of disarray arises from a set of methodological and theoretical controversies among medievalists. A somewhat artificial divide now separates scholars working on manorial archives into two camps. On one side, stands the cadre captained by the earliest innovator in the field, J. Ambrose Raftis of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto (whence: "Toronto School").⁶ Across the village green, stands the newer team headed by R. H. Hilton and most recently represented by the publications of Zvi Razi.⁷ In contrast to the organic picture of the manorial regime painted by adherents of the first team, the latter school, equipped with a Marxist perspective, portrays relationships between lords and peasants as primarily disharmonious and conflictual. This theoretical divide is common to many historical fields, but medievalists are also plagued by a series of methodological controversies.⁸ The basic stumbling block centers around the issue of surname reliability. Was a suitor to a manorial court consistently identified by one surname, or by several? Might multiple villagers have been identically cited by the same fore-name and surname? Can surnames be used as reliable guides to family groups? These perplexing questions require systematic answers, but no

⁵See, for example, the description of manorial records by Alan Macfarlane in *Reconstructing Historical Communities* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 46-57. Macfarlane identifies these records as major sources for studying the rural life of late medieval England, but he focuses solely upon their early modern characteristics (describing, for example, an almost exclusive focus in manorial courts upon property transfers). He also states, without an adequate recognition of the extraordinary depth of medieval materials, that medievalists concentrate upon these records because of the absence of other materials that facilitate the work of early modernists (p. 49).

⁶J. Ambrose Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility* (Toronto, 1964) and *Warboys* (Toronto, 1974); Edwin Brezette DeWindt, *Land and People in Holywell-cum-Needingworth* (Toronto, 1972); Edward Britton, *The Community of the Vill* (Toronto, 1977).

⁷R. H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975); Zvi Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish* (Cambridge, 1980). It is worth noting that Hilton's approach to the medieval peasantry (in terms of both sources and geography) ranges more widely than that adopted by Raftis. Razi's study, however, shares with the published works of the 'Toronto School' a focus on the manorial records of a single community.

⁸For the best methodological critique, see Wrightson, "Medieval Villagers." Most of Wrightson's reservations are echoed by Razi in "The Toronto School's Reconstitution of Medieval Peasant Society: A Critical View," *Past and Present*, 85 (1979), 141-57. Razi has also leveled sharp criticisms of the techniques and conclusions of Raftis and his colleagues in "Family, Land and the Village Community in Later Medieval England," *Past and Present*, 93 (1981), 3-36. Richard Smith of the Cambridge Group has avoided partisanship in this fray; see his dissertation, "English Peasant Life-Cycles and Socio-Economic Networks: A Quantitative Geographical Case Study," (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge Univ. 1974).

rules have yet been developed to guide researchers through the surname jungle. Until the complex debate that has grown around these questions is resolved, medievalists cannot confidently reconstruct either individual or familial histories. And without such a strong foundation in personal and familial identifications, analysts of manorial data can only produce studies that lack both substance and depth. Moreover, methodological controversies extend beyond the vital issue of identification to encompass almost every aspect of data selection and analysis. What sorts of manorial records are appropriate for social analyses? How should researchers reconstruct socio-economic divisions, trace social mobility, and tabulate demographic change? Since no consensus has been reached on these issues, the interpretative comparison of different localities has been obstructed by the unique analytical techniques and questions of each investigator. Instead of constructing general trends and patterns, medievalists are collecting a series of individual studies—completed with immense cost and effort—that are too idiosyncratic to provide comparative data.

It is hoped that the following discussion will begin the process of rescuing medieval manorial records not only from the misconceptions and misuses prompted by the early modern focus of the new social history, but also from the internal methodological debates that have been more divisive than constructive. This task is a broad one, but the suggestions focus on the fundamental issue of how best to pull together dispersed pieces of data to reconstruct family groups. Until satisfactory methods of family reconstitution are developed, all analyses of manorial data will rest on shaky foundations. We will explore the major issues surrounding family reconstitution from the three perspectives of the researcher: the selection of sources, the proper techniques of data retrieval and analysis, and the appropriate analytical issues and methods.

Unless we learn to accept manorial records on their own terms and to develop systematic approaches that will facilitate confident comparative work, the tremendous potential of these records will remain untapped. But, aside from specific historical contexts, this work on English manorial records has a technical, methodological foundation that could profoundly affect other areas of historical enquiry. The peculiar problems encountered in analyzing medieval manorial materials are characteristic of many types of historical sources that remain, as yet, relatively unused and unexamined by social historians and demographers. Consider the recent example of parish registers which just a few decades ago were of interest only to genealogists and antiquarians. The emergence of parish register data into the historical limelight has directly affected the exploitation of numerous ancillary sources—such as household listings, censuses, and muster records. The methodological conquest of manorial records may produce a similar ripple effect on related sources by raising new questions and proposing new techniques.

The records that survive from the English manors of the later Middle

Ages fall roughly into three categories.⁹ Manorial administrators occasionally produced surveys detailing the manor's tenants, the rents they paid, and/or their customary rights and obligations. These surveys normally relied upon information supplied by juries of male tenants, but they were not compiled on regular schedules and only reflect the economic organization of a manor at specific points in time. Most important, these surveys were formal fiscal records; they listed tenants, not inhabitants, not even household heads. All persons not legal tenants—wives, children, sub-leasees, servants—were unimportant to manorial officials and were, therefore, ignored. The second type of record is marginally more useful to demographers and historians of family life. Every September at the feast of St. Michael, manorial officers accounted for their receipts and payments during the previous twelve months. These account rolls, unlike surveys, were compiled on regular schedules and can survive in long series that detail the economic rhythms of medieval manors. However, accounts, like surveys, described the economic structures of the manor, not the economic lives of the peasantry. The actual cultivators of the soil appeared in manorial accounts only if they directly figured in the official recitation of monetary obligations and their fulfillment—as renters of demesne lands, sellers of foodstuffs, wage-laborers, and payers of required annual fines. The basic pursuits of the peasantry were tangential to the main interests of manorial accountants.

These first two categories of manorial sources are certainly useful to social historians. Surveys, particularly when they include lists of customs, can provide essential information about the implicit assumptions of community life; they can, for example, spell out in fine detail the rules that regulated inheritance, widowhood, or field use. Coupled with account rolls, surveys of rent-paying tenants can be used to reconstruct a clear picture of the manorial superstructure that governed, in so many respects, the options and choices of the common people.¹⁰ But the third type of manorial record, because its production was closely controlled by the constituents of a manor, reflects most fully the actual lives of the peasantry. Court rolls are the formal records of the tribunals technically convened by the lord's jurisdiction, but practically controlled by the suitors themselves through their jury panels, their officers, and their local customs. Account rolls and surveys can be very useful supplementary materials, but court rolls are the essential sources for examining the social and domestic experiences of the late medieval English peasantry.

⁹For a concise introduction to English manorial records, see J. Z. Titow, *English Rural Society 1200-1350* (London, 1969).

¹⁰Both Hilton and Raftis began their academic careers with such studies, see R. H. Hilton, *The Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates in the 14th and 15th Centuries* (London, 1947), and J. Ambrose Raftis, *The Estates of Ramsey Abbey* (Toronto, 1957). Two notable recent studies are Barbara Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1977) and Christopher Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society* (Cambridge, 1980).

The village court of the late thirteenth, fourteenth, and early fifteenth centuries was the quintessential community organization; almost everyone attended its frequent meetings, and almost any concern, no matter how trivial, could merit court attention.¹¹ The jurisdiction of manorial courts did not extend over major crimes, but did encompass all minor criminal and civil complaints. In the typical village court record, the historian will find information about land conveyances, leases, and inheritances, about problems with maintaining the roads and fences of the community, about animals or persons who trespassed and damaged the property of others, and about all sorts of agreements and quarrels between villagers. Elections to the numerous offices of village government were usually recorded, as were the fines paid by local brewers, bakers, and butchers to sell their products. Jurors also presented and fined their fellow villagers for numerous minor disturbances of the peace, such as thefts, assaults, illegitimate sexual activities, and slanderous comments. The entries of a single sitting of a village court, then, present a fairly full record of all events and problems that had arisen in the community since the last court session. The jury would be impanelled, a few people would be excused formally from attendance, a villager or two would transfer or sell a parcel of land, a few others would record debt contracts or complain about unfulfilled agreements, a young man would inherit his father's property, a widow would enter her free bench, all men and women who had sold ale or bread in the preceding weeks would pay perfunctory fines, and a few people would be assessed for disturbing the peace. It is rather unusual to encounter a single court session that does not include the names of from fifty to one hundred individuals.¹²

The value of such information is obvious, and historians have successfully used court rolls to reconstruct social strata among the peasantry, networks of cooperation and antagonism, and patterns of social respon-

¹¹The most comprehensive introduction to village court rolls is Raftis's pioneering study, *Tenure and Mobility*.

¹²According to legal theorists, manorial courts were, in fact, broken into four discrete parts: the court baron (for free tenants), the court customary (for servile tenants), the view of frankpledge (to oversee tithing organization), and the court leet (to adjudicate major infractions of the peace). In actual practice, these legal jurisdictions were frequently combined. On most manors, the courts baron and customary were merged into the three-weekly *curia* sessions, while the frankpledge and leet jurisdictions were merged into semi-annual or annual meetings. The records of these latter sessions usually include information on the administration of tithings (with young men either entering tithings or being fined for non-entry), on infractions of the peace (focusing on incidents that involved the entire community because of the raising of the hue and cry), and on commercial activities (bakers, butchers, and other petty salespeople were often liable only for annual fines paid at the frankpledge court). It should be noted that the suggestions raised below—on the historical use of both regular court and frankpledge-leet sessions—apply only to rural court rolls. The courts convened in towns or large, market villages could cover different sorts of information. Although some of the techniques proposed below might be applicable to such archival materials, they will not be specifically considered in this essay.

sibility and economic wealth. The use of these records, however, by historical demographers and historians of family life is more problematic. Court rolls contain a veritable wealth of social information, but they can be frustratingly silent about the basic perimeters of human life. Births were never noted in court rolls. Because unfree women customarily paid marriage license fines, marriages were often recorded; but many women were not subject to such fines, and the specification of the bride's intended husband, which was usually irrelevant to the payment, was left to the clerk's discretion. Hence, only some marriages were noted, and many of these lack the names of both spouses. The situation is not much better for tracing deaths. Courts usually noted the deaths of legal tenants in the course of supervising the inheritance of their lands, but deaths of non-tenants—wives, children, sub-leasees, servants, laborers—did not merit legal notice. We can, as a result, reconstruct a great deal about certain aspects of the lives of medieval peasants without knowing some basic demographic facts. We might know what offices and social responsibilities a given male villager undertook, how much land he possessed and sold and traded, and who his friends and enemies in the village were, but we will seldom know how old he was, when and whom he married, and, in many cases, when and how he died.¹³

The absence of such demographic information profoundly affects our ability to reconstruct both the life rhythms of individuals, and the aggregative demographic histories of their communities. It also sharply inhibits the precise reconstruction of local families. In the course of recording the major events of an individual's life in baptismal, marital, and burial entries, parish registers also usually tell historians the names of that individual's parents, siblings, spouse, and children. Court rolls, in contrast, provide information on family relationships only incidentally and sporadically. A man can appear dozens of times in his village's court records without the names of his parents, his wife, or his children being noted. Moreover, the difficulties of pinpointing such basic nuclear relationships pale beside the acute problems encountered in reconstructing more distant consanguineous and affinal ties. We can recreate the social activities of a peasant in fine detail without being able to define precisely the kin relationships underpinning that community interaction. Parish registers supply demographic and familial data, and nothing more. Court rolls abound with information on social interaction, but are frustratingly silent on the demographic and familial foundations of that social

¹³Information on ages, marriages or deaths can occasionally be inferred from other sources (boys usually entered tithing groups at 14 years of age; some marriages were mentioned, long after the actual weddings, in inheritance cases or land disputes; and in rare instances, wills or testaments written by peasants have survived). Such information, like data on family relationships, is not consistently provided. It should be noted that data on female peasants are especially limited. Because the village courts were a public forum, males predominate among persons cited in the records. Women not only appeared much less frequently, but also are more difficult to trace because they usually changed their names upon marriage.

life. The former provides a framework that lacks social substance, the latter produces a substance without a framework.

The first step towards constructing a demographic and familial infrastructure to support the wealth of social data found in medieval court rolls lies in developing standards for the selection of workable source collections. Manorial records vary tremendously in content, in scheduling, and in survival. Some manorial courts generated numerous entries about inheritances, extra-marital sexual behavior, and widow's land rights, but on other manors such matters were, as far as the extant sources can show, ignored by both villagers and administrators. Similarly, the courts of some manors met every three weeks (accumulating as many as eighteen sessions in a given year), but on other manors, courts convened as infrequently as twice annually. Finally, the vagaries of time have left spotty records for some manors and preserved magnificent series of records intact for other communities. Because these differences profoundly affect a researcher's ability to reconstitute families, any collection of manorial records must be carefully assessed prior to the onset of complete data retrieval. Four criteria are especially important in assessing potential sources.

First, family reconstitutions must be based upon the largest possible record collections. Because familial linkages were stated only occasionally in the courts, each surviving court session increases significantly the availability of explicit genealogical statements. Account rolls and surveys provide little data on familial relationships and cannot compensate for an inadequate set of court rolls. Semi-annual courts did not atone for their infrequent meetings with exceptionally comprehensive or detailed reports, but instead compiled records whose length and depth roughly paralleled those typical of three-weekly courts. It is, then, essential to avoid manors whose courts met infrequently and to seek out manors in which courts met regularly every three weeks. In terms of family reconstitutions, the difference between having two or eighteen courts per year is indescribably large. Generally, an acceptable survival rate would range between an average of eight to ten courts for each year of the period examined. Courts will invariably be missing (and some substantial gaps are inevitable because dozens of sessions were often recorded on a single roll), but records with large gaps should be avoided. As a rule of thumb, any gap larger than five years and the occurrence of more than one such gap in a fifty-year period should prompt reevaluation of the collection. The difficulties inherent in analyzing manorial sources must be offset by abundant materials, and these standards are not, it should be noted, unrealistic. The records of the Northamptonshire manor of Brigstock include an average of nine courts for each year between 1287 and 1348 with only six gaps, none of more than three years.¹⁴ Zvi Razi's recently

¹⁴Judith MacKenzie Bennett, "Gender, Family and Community: A Comparative Study of the English Peasantry, 1287-1349," (Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Toronto 1981), pp. 46-48.

published study of Halesowen is based on an average of almost thirteen annual sessions over 131 years; only sixteen years lack any records.¹⁵ Such rates of documentary survival are probably not as unusual as we may think.

Second, potential source collections that have passed the quantity tests should be scrutinized for qualitative content. Certain court roll entries are particularly useful to demographers and historians of family life. Courts that did not regularly include entries about inheritances, marriage license payments, and the induction of young men into tithing groups will provide inadequate data for family reconstitution. Inheritance entries not only allow researchers to assign terminal dates to individual histories, but also invariably provide explicit statements on the family relationships of the deceased. Marriage fine entries offer the only regular opportunity for tracing the movement of women from their natal households to their marital units. Because young men normally entered tithing groups at fourteen years of age, archival collections whose frankpledge courts include such citations provide the only approximate age data regularly available from these sources. As a rough rule, probably four or five such entries should occur for every full year of courts on a consistent basis throughout the sequence. Because recording practices were partially dependent upon clerical idiosyncrasies, the collection should be checked at periodic intervals (every ten years or so) to ensure that these types of entries did not disappear during the course of the period proposed for study.¹⁶ Less crucial, but still desirable entries include those recording sexual misbehavior, illegitimate births, the dower rights of widows, and emigration from the manor.

Aside from checking types of entries, it is important to examine sources for their coverage of female villagers. The representation of women is significant not only for the history of female experiences, but also in terms of the mechanics of family reconstitution. Since women spent most of their lives dependent upon men (fathers, husbands, brothers, sons), they were identified in the court records with explicit genealogical statements much more frequently than men. In some cases, entire families (including linkages between males) can be reconstructed from such "female

¹⁵Razi, *Life*, p. 10.

¹⁶The rule of four to five inheritance and marriage entries per year is a very flexible guide. Razi found this rate for recorded marriages in Halesowen, *Life*, pp. 45-50, 152-53. It is, however, impossible to postulate the average occurrence of inheritances or marriages in any given manorial environment because we lack some basic demographic data; we do not know (1) the exact size of the population under study (population estimates from court rolls are always exceedingly tenuous and cannot be made until *after* all data collection is completed), and (2) the number of deaths or marriages that would escape court attention (because they concerned non-tenants). Hence, medievalists cannot apply strict tests such as those proposed by D. E. C. Eversley for selecting parish registers (see "Exploitation of Anglican Parish Registers by Aggregative Analysis," in *English Historical Demography*, ed. Wrigley, pp. 54-56).

dependency” statements alone. Because women usually accounted for about one in every ten court appearances not associated with the production or sale of ale, a selected sample of courts should be checked to ensure that this minimal level was maintained and that women were identified by forename rather than just by dependency status.¹⁷ Some clerks consistently cited women only as “wife of John Baker” or “daughter of Richard Aylward,” rather than as “Matilda wife of John Baker” and “Agnes daughter of Richard Aylward.” Records that consistently use the former method of identification complicate the linkage process and should be avoided.

Third, researchers must carefully consider the geographical entity covered by the manorial records. It is important to select a manor that corresponds as closely as possible to a coherent geographical unit. Ideally, manor and village should be coterminous. Communities split into several manorial jurisdictions cannot be adequately studied through the records of only one of the holding manors. The obverse, however, has certain advantages. Researchers must avoid communities that included several manors, but they might seek out manors that included several communities. Two recent studies based on court rolls have profited from the division of their manors into numerous hamlets, as opposed to each manor constituting a nucleated village. The existence of such intra-manorial divisions facilitated the linkage process because each individual could be identified not only by forename and surname, but also by hamlet of residence.¹⁸

Finally, researchers should consider the presence or absence of sources supplementary to the data derived from court records. In adequate quantity and quality, court rolls are the essential sources for reconstituting medieval peasant families, and successful analyses can be undertaken in the absence of any other types of materials if the court series is sufficiently rich.¹⁹ Any collection of court rolls, however, is enhanced by additional materials. Surveys including customals detail the general rules—governing widows’ rights, inheritances, land entries, officeholding, tithing membership—whose specific applications are recorded in the court rolls. Because account rolls occasionally duplicated information on mar-

¹⁷Brewing citations must be eliminated because the number of women involved in ale production varied from village to village, and this variance dramatically affects ratios of female appearances. Consider, for example, the data for the pre-plague records of Brigstock (549 courts), Iver in Buckinghamshire (71 courts) and the Ramsey Abbey manor of Houghton (32 courts). In these records, women respectively accounted for 22 per cent, 14 per cent and 13 per cent of all court citations. But this wide range is narrowed considerably by eliminating brewing citations; without ale fines, women respectively accounted for 12 per cent, 11 per cent and 9 per cent of all appearances. See Bennett, “Gender,” pp. 194, 276, 330, and 331.

¹⁸See Smith’s studies of Redgrave and Rickinghall in “Life-Cycles,” and Razi’s study of Halesowen in *Life*.

¹⁹Razi’s study (*Life*), for example, is based upon such a fine series of court records that the lack of ancillary sources scarcely matters.

riage and inheritance fines, they can sometimes be used to check clerical accuracy and to fill in gaps in court records. Central government records cover complementary areas usually ignored in manorial materials. The lay subsidies of the 1320s and 1330s provide vital data on economic distinctions within a manor, and the poll taxes of 1377, 1379, and 1381 provide rare (albeit problematic) listings of adult inhabitants.

Archival collections meeting these criteria offer the best opportunities for in-depth analysis. Researchers whose records provide sufficient quantitative and qualitative information will have a fighting chance in the battle to reconstitute families from medieval court roll data. Once a source collection has been chosen, the initial stages of data extraction are fairly straightforward. All named citations from the records should be noted on cards that include full recapitulations of the original entries (identification of source, type of entry and its resolution, names of other participants). Each named citation must be recorded on a separate slip of paper to facilitate later reshuffling and reevaluation of the person(s) actually identified by that name. This process consumes enormous time and produces immense files; it can be somewhat alleviated by using symbols and abbreviations, but it must be completed with patience and care.²⁰

Once these cards have been sorted alphabetically, the first stage of data analysis—the identification of individuals—can begin.²¹ At this juncture, the researcher encounters the primary problem of court roll analysis, the problem of surname stability and reliability. The earliest forays into the use of manorial records for social history have been justifiably criticized for too freely associating surnames and families, as well as for relying

²⁰The best guide to the process of data extraction is Macfarlane's *Reconstructing* pp. 81-112. Although his elaborate suggestions might not be within the reach of those who lack research grants and research assistants, his proposals can be modified to suit the needs of individual research projects. Hence, the duplication of all cards (by using carbon copies) might not be feasible, but researchers should, nevertheless, construct (during the actual process of data collection) indices of important citations. For example, researchers should keep separate lists of officers, of tradespeople, of placenames, and of extraordinary name citations (especially those in which aliases are indicated). Researchers should also construct systems of colored cards and tabs to flag data that are especially relevant for the projected analyses. Although the immense bulk of the data collected make computer analysis attractive, the initial stages of research are best done by hand. The early processes of data analysis—separating individuals from names and families from surnames—are too complex and idiosyncratic to be amenable to standardized programming. At subsequent stages, however, the data (once sorted into individuals and families) could be analyzed with the aid of computers.

²¹In the interests of clarity, some of the issues involved in individual identifications are discussed below under the techniques of family reconstruction. Hence, the initial process of alphabetization requires, of course, the judicious sorting out of Latin and English surnames. Although the reconstruction of individual histories must precede family reconstitutions, the two processes are inextricably intertwined. In many cases, individual histories will be revised and altered in the light of family reconstitutions, as, for example, the separate careers of fathers and namesake sons become more distinct.

upon surnames that were too fluid and too unspecific to warrant precise identifications.²² Early researchers optimistically assumed that persons identified by the same surname were *ipso facto* related to one another. They also employed surnames that were clearly imprecise in designation—especially those based on occupations (John le Miller), offices (Henry le Reeve), geographic locations (Richard atte Well) and personal names (John son of Hawisa). It is important to note that the problem does not arise from a complete absence of surnames; even in the late thirteenth century, when court rolls first became available in great quantities, almost all court citations identified individuals by both forename and surname.²³ Instead, the problems arise from the instability of these surnames and their presumed unreliability in identifying either individuals or family groups. To a certain extent, these difficulties are confined temporally to the earliest surviving manorial materials. The fluidity of surname identification apparent in the records of the late thirteenth century had disappeared by the advent of the fifteenth century. Surnames rapidly became more stable and more reliable as the fourteenth century progressed.²⁴

At the stage of identifying individuals, the surname fluidity of the earliest records raises two daunting possibilities. First, certain individuals, at different times, might have been identified by different surnames. Hence, a single person might be cited in the records as both Andrew Sprot and Andrew Reeve, and might be unwittingly treated by researchers as two separate individuals.²⁵ In many cases, the depth of coverage provided by court roll data enables researchers to catch such cases. One vital flag is provided by the occasional merging of multiple

²²Wrightson, "Medieval Villagers," and Razi, "A Critical View."

²³The occurrence of persons identified without some sort of surname is so rare that it is not even discussed in most studies (see, for example, Razi, *Life*, pp. 3-4, 11-26). The exact incidence of citations without surnames from a roll of courts held in Iver (Buckinghamshire) between 1332 and 1376 was 78 (0.57 per cent) of 13,761 citations. Of these 78 cases, 3 persons were identified by unusual personal names that sufficed for identification, 3 were identified by two personal names (John son of Waba), and the remaining 72 were identified by official position (29 cases), occupation (3 cases) or ecclesiastical position (40 cases). These data were extracted from the roll deposited at the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society, 128/53. Until quite recently, most non-medievalists have assumed that surnames were a fairly modern phenomenon. In the first edition of *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1965), Peter Laslett claimed that "Not so long before the reign of Elizabeth most Englishmen were without even surnames," p. 44. He wisely deleted this unfounded assertion from the second edition (1971).

²⁴Even Razi, who has made much of the instability of surnames, concedes that the problem is largely confined to the pre-plague period, see *Life*, p. 3. Richard McKinley has traced the growing stability of surnames during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in *Norfolk and Suffolk Surnames in the Middle Ages* (London, 1975), pp. 3-30.

²⁵The Reeve-Sprot example is hypothetical, but typical of most cases. For examples of the care that must go into tracing these aliases, see Razi, *Life*, pp. 11-24. It is worth noting that instances of one individual using two forenames have never been reported; the problem of aliases applies solely to surnames.

surnames by court clerks (Andrew Sprot le Reeve). Also, the stability of surname use can be checked by tracing stable individual activity patterns (an argument between two persons that lasted several years, an office that was clearly possessed by a certain person over a specific period, and so forth). If, for example, the name Andrew Sprot was cited as aletaster on forty occasions over a five-year period during which an Andrew Reeve was twice named as serving in this office, the researcher has strong presumptive evidence for one individual being identified by two surnames. Of course, other data (forenames of known kin, location of residence and landholdings, other activities, and so on) would have to correlate before confident linkage could be made. Although the incidence of such aliases is impossible to tabulate fully, the use of multiple surnames is relatively rare. In the final analysis, however, we must admit our dependence upon the written record. If our documents never indicate that Andrew Sprot also called himself Andrew Reeve, we will unknowingly treat these two names as belonging to two separate individuals. As long as we can confidently link a collection of citations about Andrew Sprot to one individual, however, we have made significant progress; although we might occasionally fail to link that Andrew Sprot with his activities accomplished under his Reeve alias, we will have some picture of the man. This picture, although incomplete, is both accurate and worthwhile. The major problems created by such linkage failures redound less upon the reconstruction of individual histories than upon demographic calculations which can be devastated by such inadvertent inflation of population counts.

The second difficulty is an inversion of the first and arises from the identification of several individuals by identical names. Because the pool of forenames used by medieval villagers was exceedingly small, it seems very probable that certain persons would have inevitably shared common forenames and common surnames.²⁶ This problem, however, is largely illusory because it was in the interests of all administrative bodies—the monarchy, the manor and the village—to ensure that their formal records clearly identified and differentiated all persons. The compilers of records like the lay subsidy rolls would have been wasting their time had the individuals they were assessing been able to evade later payment by claiming misattribution. Similarly, the entire manorial record system was based upon the precise identification of the manor's residents in its account rolls and court rolls; how were lands to be administered and rents to be collected if several villagers shared an indistinguishable name? One might imagine that the peasants, in a visceral response to external authorities, cultivated such confusion, but the villagers themselves also had a vested interest in assuring the reliability of name citation. Since villagers involved in disputes or controversies would frequently request

²⁶In the roll of Iver courts held between 1332 and 1376, only 45 male forenames (including 17 used only once or twice) and 38 female forenames (including 16 used once or twice) were employed in 13,761 citations.

that the records of prior courts be searched to verify their claims, the validity of land transactions, concords, maintenance agreements, and all other contracts between villagers would have been seriously undermined if one name applied to several villagers. Indeed, the court rolls themselves testify to an obsession with the precise identification of all individuals cited. Clerks almost invariably used additional modifiers to differentiate persons who happened to carry the same name contemporaneously. Hence, a father and his namesake son would be separated by senior and junior tags attached to their names. Other persons who shared common names were distinguished by geographical locators (*de Thorney* or *de Sutton*) or occupational titles (*le Miller* or *la Brewster*).²⁷

Because researchers cannot identify and tabulate all the cases in which one person used several names or several persons used one name, it is impossible to cite reassuring statistics about the frequency with which these two name linkage problems occurred. Clearly, however, the imprecisions that do exist are confined almost exclusively to the pre-plague period, and the challenges of identifying individuals in even the earliest records are not insurmountable. The greatest weapon that the medievalist brings to this struggle is the abundance of social data provided in manorial archives. Name changes and name differentiations are particularly important to scholars working with parish registers because the abbreviated entries of these ledgers address only the main events of life. Their lack of depth, coupled with long time gaps between references to a given name, make precise linkages between individuals and names particularly risky. In contrast, court rolls can provide literally hundreds of citations to a single villager who can regularly appear in the records every three weeks for decades.²⁸ With such abundant and consecutive data, peculiarities that complicate name identification are easily traced by the researcher who can consider not only names, but also activity patterns. Because each case presents unique problems and requires unique solutions, this stage of court roll study is especially ill-suited to computerized analysis. In some cases, the data invariably are too complex and too contradictory to yield clear solutions, but such isolated failures must

²⁷In some cases, these additional modifiers will not suffice for clear historical reconstruction. The Iver roll, for example, boasts 10 different methods of citing members of the large Norgent surname group with the forename William (William Norgent without additional modifier/senior/junior/son of Richard Norgent/son of Christina Norgent/shepherd/de Northwode/son of Lawrence Norgent de Northwode/de Thorney/son of William Norgent de Thorney). Although several of these different citations can be linked because of additional data, complete reconstructions cannot be confidently completed. Fortunately, such complications are rare, but they do illustrate the unhappy fact that full use of court roll data is impossible. Even the most careful and complete methods will yield name data for which confident linkages cannot be made.

²⁸In the pre-plague courts of Brigstock, for example, males averaged over 20 appearances each, and some individuals accumulated enormously large files of court appearances. Henry Kroyl senior merited 210 court citations; his son Henry Kroyl junior tallied 586 court entries. Bennett, "Gender," pp. 137 and 194.

not obscure the fact that individuals can be clearly and definitively identified from court roll evidence in the vast majority of cases.

The next analytical stage—the linkage of individuals into family groups—brings us to the focal point of the surname controversy. It is true, as some have argued, that surnames do not automatically constitute families, but it is also true that surnames are generally reliable guides to domestic groups. It is very rare to encounter two closely related individuals (two brothers, a parent and child, a husband and wife) who did not use a common surname. The only regular exceptions were married women who, because they usually adopted their husband's surnames, were identified by surnames different from their parents and siblings. This is, of course, a familiar practice. On the other hand, although most related persons were identified by a shared surname, common surnames could be used by non-related individuals. Consider a case taken from the fourteenth-century records of Iver. When Thomas Coupere died in the 1349 plague, his properties in Iver were inherited by Robert Coupere who was, according to the entry, related to the deceased (*consanguineous*). But, over a decade later, a panel of Iver jurors declared that Robert Coupere held these lands unjustly because he was not, in fact, related to Thomas Coupere (*non est de sanguine suo*).²⁹ Robert Coupere's experiences exemplify the researcher's problem; a shared surname did not guarantee a familial relationship, but even contemporaries were inclined to assume that, in fact, a common surname did indicate a familial tie. In short, surnames are both useful and useless in family reconstitutions. We can best resolve this dilemma by a dual approach based upon rigorous surname analysis as well as a recognition that different technical requirements are imposed by different research objectives.

The researcher must begin by isolating a core of reasonably precise surnames. This process requires careful tracing of semantic and linguistic linkages between surnames. The use of both Latin and English forms is common and easily caught, but divergent spellings and derivations must also be carefully traced. For example, Foughel, Foul, and Fowel were all attributions to the same surname, and a villager identified as a "son of William" might eventually end up with the surname Williams or Williamson. Judicious use of surname dictionaries is a crucial prerequisite of accurate family reconstitutions.³⁰ Next, imprecise surnames must be

²⁹Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society, 128/53, folio 47 (court for 6/6/1349) and folio 78 (court for 6/9/1360).

³⁰This process of checking all surname variations will require the use of the usual research tools (Medieval Latin dictionaries, Middle English dictionaries, the appropriate volumes of the English Placename Society). Other useful references are: E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (London, 1947); P. H. Reaney, *A Dictionary of British Surnames* (London, 1976); C. W. Bardsley, *A Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames* (London, 1901); Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Dictionary of English Placenames* (Oxford, 1940); M. T. Lofvenberg, *Studies in Middle English Local Surnames* (Lund, 1942); B. Thursson, *Middle English Occupational Terms* (Lund, 1950). For the development of methodologies that use surname evidence for demographic analyses, see Peter

ruthlessly eliminated from consideration. Surnames loosely based on personal names, local areas, common occupations, and offices were generally too unspecific to warrant inclusion in analyses of family life. As a general rule, any surname that was regularly preceded by a preposition should be treated suspiciously; as surnames stabilized during the course of the fourteenth century, prepositions were rapidly dropped.³¹ John son of Benedict implies a fluidity absent from John Benedict. It is wise to eliminate imprecise surnames even if the analyst has clear evidence of personal relationships between some of the identified people.³² Because surnames derived from distant towns or from unique personal names might merit inclusion in the core of precise surnames, a fair measure of discretion is required for this weeding process.³³ After this stage is completed, the researcher should be prepared to defend both the distinctiveness and the stability of each remaining surname.

These surnames constitute what can be called “presumptive families.” A presumptive family gathers together individuals who shared identification by a precise surname. Explicit genealogical linkages between these individuals might not be available, but the surname itself was sufficiently stable to merit an assumed relationship. At this point, researchers who are not intrinsically interested in family life—who are interested in family relationships, for example, only insofar as they affect debt litigation or patterns of geographic mobility—can probably stop. Without undertaking the burdensome task of full family reconstitutions, they can use presumptive families in their analyses. This approach provides social historians whose primary interests are not domestic or familial matters

McClure, “Patterns of Migration in the Late Middle Ages; The Evidence of English Place-Name Surnames,” *Economic History Review*, second series, 33 (1979), 167-82, and Robert McKinley, *Norfolk and Suffolk Surnames*.

³¹During the five decades (1332-1376) covered by the Iver roll, 127 of the 299 frequently-used surnames (42.5 per cent) were preceded by a preposition at least once. But only 21 of these surnames continued to be preceded by prepositions into the 1370s. It is interesting to note that these 21 surnames occurred frequently in the rolls, indicating that neither familiarity nor repeated use caused abandonment of prepositions. Rather, it appears that prepositions continued to be used for those surnames whose origins were still recent and immediate. For each of the three placename surnames that still employed “de” into the 1370s, the original individual from the locality identified by the surname was still living at the time.

³²Some researchers might object to wholesale elimination of surnames for which some linkages are known. For example, some scholars might not want to eliminate all data under the Reeve surname because some persons so identified were explicitly related. It should be remembered that surnames like Reeve are inherently untrustworthy as guides to families—even if some relationships are known. Therefore, the surname cannot be elevated to the “presumptive family” category discussed below. Data from such surnames can, of course, be tagged for later examination of specific known relationships. In other words, the surname group as a whole cannot be used, but specific known relationships can be pulled for later analyses.

³³Hence, in the case of Iver, all three placename surnames preceded by “de” into the 1370s were sufficiently stable (and from sufficiently distant places, rather than adjacent localities) to merit treatment as distinct surnames.

with a fairly accurate and expeditious method of integrating familial relationships into their analyses. The use of presumptive families will undoubtedly lead to some distortion, but it provides a reasonable stance between the imprecise identification of all surnames with families and the arduous process of family reconstitution (which is, even in the best of cases, only partially successful). Presumptive and known relationships, however, should always be differentiated. If one is, for example, describing the frequency with which ale-wives used family members as guarantors of their fines, one would have to distinguish pledges by known relatives (based on explicit genealogical statements), presumptive relatives (based on precise surnames alone) and non-relatives.³⁴

Scholars whose research objectives require complete family data will focus on reconstituting the presumptive families for which adequate data survive. Without exception, linkages must be made only on the basis of clear, explicit statements of kin relationship. Almost all such statements will be phrased in terms of close family ties. Since more distant relationships (such as those between cousins) are almost never specifically mentioned in court records, family charts must be drawn from specified parental, sibling, and marital ties.³⁵ It is at this stage that the researcher can best appreciate the tests of quantity and quality suggested above. Because explicit genealogical statements were usually incidental to court business each surviving reference to an individual increases the chances that the clerk will have specified that person's familial context. And a single inheritance entry or dispute involving a female can often sort out an entire series of complex familial relationships. Because the process of drawing genealogies and differentiating generations of persons whose families often repeated personal names with numbing regularity occasionally requires reassessment of personal histories, family reconstitutions sometimes prompt reevaluations of the individual identifications made at the first stage of data analysis.³⁶

In the final analysis, reconstitution of families from medieval court rolls is never thoroughly successful. Most families will be incompletely reconstituted, with a few individuals identified by the common surname who lack explicit genealogical information. Even in the best cir-

³⁴Because manorial records provide valuable data on many aspects of medieval rural life, medievalists must accept a reasonable method that will allow scholars to integrate familial factors into their social, economic, and legal analyses without actually undertaking the arduous (and tentative) process of family reconstitution.

³⁵Richard M. Smith, "Kin and Neighbors in a Thirteenth-Century Suffolk Community," *Journal of Family History*, 4 (1979), 252-54.

³⁶The necessity of reevaluating personal histories in the light of family reconstitutions is discussed by Razi, *Life*, pp. 21-25. We must, of course, consider researchers who use only presumptive families in their analyses and consequently miss this opportunity to reassess personal histories. Such scholars should take care to discern the need for closer evaluation of individual files at the level of personal identification, and should partially reconstruct the families of all questionable cases. For example, names passed on through generations of a family will usually require partial family reconstitution to establish individual identifications.

cumstances, then, reconstitutions give only partial pictures of the family network. This is particularly true of the marital links that tied women to two families; the families of origin of wives are seldom known, and the marital families of sisters and daughters are similarly obscure in most cases. Even the most completely reconstituted families fail to trace relationships beyond the nuclear family unit. Often the wife and children of only one male in each generation are known, and cousins and in-laws are extraordinarily difficult to trace.³⁷ As a result, it seems that we must add yet another word to the already cumbersome vocabulary of medieval rural history; because non-nuclear relationships are so difficult to trace, it might be wise to speak in terms of *presumed* non-relatives. In the example above, about tabulating the pledges received by ale-wives, we should distinguish known relatives, presumed relatives, and *presumed* non-relatives to recognize that a woman could easily have been pledged by a father or brother who was identified by a different surname and whose relationship to her was unspecified.

If researchers adhere to these preliminary methods of data retrieval and analysis, they will produce studies that are both reliable and fairly standardized. Although the production of medieval court rolls was too localized and too idiosyncratic to attain a level of uniformity amenable to standard formats, these variations do not eliminate all possibilities of comparative work. Medievalists can, by adopting some general, preliminary rules, accumulate a corpus of acceptable data on rural life. Eventually, we can further facilitate the comparative process by constructing a series of analytical categories (on, for example, patterns of officeholding, landholding, geographical mobility, and commercial activity) that can be applied to all collections of manorial data.³⁸ While

³⁷See, for example, the genealogies presented by Razi, *Life*, p. 18 and p.20. Almost no cousins or affinal relatives are traced in these tables.

³⁸Both Razi ("A Critical View") and Wrightson have criticized the studies of Raftis, Britton, and Edwin DeWindt for their rather cavalier socio-economic groupings based on official activities. They have argued that these studies place too much socio-economic importance on official duties and ignore change over time (because a surname that appeared for many decades could be highly ranked based on the official activities of only one person). The first criticism is overdrawn; official activity clearly constitutes an easily retrievable and relatively accurate index of socio-economic status. Anne DeWindt's careful study of a wide variety of factors contributing to socio-economic status (a study that merited praise by Razi, p. 149) proves that officeholding was closely correlated to success in other areas (as judged by landholdings, number of animals, pledging activities, etc.). See Anne DeWindt, "Peasant Power Structures in Fourteenth-Century King's Ripton," *Mediaeval Studies*, 38 (1976), pp. 236-67. Other studies confirm the general accuracy of officeholding patterns as guides to overall status, see Britton, *Community*, pp. 70-93. The second problem is more serious and can best be resolved by employing two levels of categorization; the first level assigning a rank to a particular surname (or presumptive family) and the second, more precise level assigning an individual rank based on either the individual's official activities or (in the case of females) the activities of fathers and husbands. These matters are discussed more fully in Bennett, "Gender," in which new categories (to measure brewing activity and longevity) are also employed.

considering such categories, we should rethink what types of questions and analyses are best applied to family reconstitutions drawn from medieval court rolls. We medievalists have been mesmerized by the marvelous results of our counterparts who work with parish registers; their precise calculations of age at marriage, birth intervals, completed family size, and length of marriage (to mention just a few of the demographic criteria available from family reconstitutions in the later period) have tempted us to try to extract comparable data from our medieval sources. But court rolls do not even provide basic demographic information on births, marriages, and deaths. Indeed, even broad trends of population growth and decline can be only indirectly inferred from court rolls.³⁹ Because attempts to extract such demographic data from court rolls invariably distort the potentials of the sources, purely demographic enquiries are, by and large, inappropriate for manorial sources. The results of such misguided attempts either misconstrue our evidence or produce absurdly tentative results. Razi, for example, has postulated the existence of differential fertility among the socio-economic groups of early fourteenth-century Halesowen.⁴⁰ His argument is based upon the incontrovertible fact that wealthier villagers produced more children who were noted in the court records. His conclusions, however, are flawed because most persons never appeared in court until their mid-teens, and the court records themselves were strongly biased according to socio-economic status. Underprivileged villagers were cited considerably less frequently and less precisely in manorial records than were their wealthier counterparts; the offspring of poorer parents were especially likely to emigrate from their natal villages or to remain unmentioned in existing records.⁴¹ The inference that poorer peasants produced fewer children is an illusion directly caused by this source disequilibrium and has no clear basis in historical reality. Quite simply, without birth and baptismal records, we cannot trace fertility. Instead of forcing medieval court rolls to support tasks for which they are ill-equipped, we should focus on the strengths of court roll data. The counterpart to Razi's misconceived effort to trace fertility patterns is Edward Britton's study of the success achieved by persons of different socio-economic status in settling second sons in the village of Broughton.⁴² Britton began with data that essentially paralleled Razi's; poorer peas-

³⁹For example, Razi (*Life*, pp. 24-26) estimates the population trend in Halesowen between 1271 and 1395 based upon a "census-like enumeration of the villagers mentioned in the court records." But Razi fails (1) to consider that changing court procedures over this century could have resulted in different recording practices and (2) to prove that different numbers of extant courts for different periods do not skew these trends. At best, such indirect estimates are only tenuous; see Bennett, "Gender," pp. 50-54 for estimates that do include adjustments for source differentials.

⁴⁰Razi, *Life*, p. 92.

⁴¹This phenomenon is common to all manorial records. For examples, see Bennett, "Gender," pp. 194, 276, and 331.

⁴²Edward Britton, "The Peasant Family in Fourteenth-Century England," *Peasant Studies Newsletter*, 5 (1976), 2-7. Britton's discussion is based on the proper

ants produced fewer children noted in the courts. But Britton, recognizing that citations to grown offspring cannot be used to study fertility, instead analyzed the data to determine how many sons actually acquired land and settled in their fathers' village. The lack of hard demographic data in court rolls is more than offset by their abundance of social information; we will never know how many children a given married couple produced, but we will know how successful they were in settling their children in the village. We must ask, then, not about age of marriage, but about social maturity at marriage; not about the incidence of widowhood, but about the experiences of widows; not about rates of illegitimacy, but about the social consequences of bastardy and extra-marital sexual activity.

At the same time that medievalists must learn to accept the essentially social, rather than demographic, nature of our sources, we must also modify our techniques of aggregative analysis to match both the strengths and the limits of our data. Straightforward aggregation of family data risks gross distortion because the examined families are so incompletely reconstituted. We cannot count offspring because so many children died young, emigrated, or escaped court notice; we cannot count sibling sets because so many sibling links were unspecified in our records; we cannot count remarriages because so many first marriages, widowhoods, and second marriages are unknown. Two approaches can sidestep this problem. First, it might often be wise to focus exclusively upon the more privileged families in a community—those whose male heads of household dominated the political (via offices), economic (via landholdings), and social life of the community. Members of such families appeared usually two to four times as frequently in the courts as did more marginal villagers. As a result, analyses of the familial experiences of this privileged sector can be made with much greater accuracy and confidence because our information on the composition and histories of such families is much more complete. If we wish, for example, to calculate the incidence with which young men and women turned to their fathers for assistance in meeting their legal obligations, we should begin by tabulating data on parental pledging among the upper stratum. Although it is unpleasant to consign the lower socio-economic groups to anonymity, this approach will lead to much greater precision. It is better to produce a clear reconstruction of one level of the peasantry than it is to produce a picture so murky as to be unreliable. The second approach is both narrower and more precise. We can offset the failure of most reconstituted families (even among those in the upper stratum) to include information on consanguineous or affinal relationships by undertaking in-depth analyses of small groups. Such microcosmic studies would focus on one or more families selected for their unusually full reconstitutions. Although this approach runs the risk of misconstruing personal idiosyncrasies for social practices, it offers the tremendous advantage of enabling the examination

assumptions, but it must be noted that his results might have been skewed by inaccurate preliminary analyses.

of questions that cannot be studied at all through normal aggregation.⁴³ Both of these tactics offset the incomplete familial data found in medieval court rolls by eschewing outright aggregation in favor of more limited analyses. Studies based on either of these strategies will yield precise and valuable results, and in many cases, the broader social impact of these specific conclusions can be checked by examining the data available on less fully reconstituted families. Hence, conclusions about the frequency of parental pledging among the upper stratum can provide a base against which the less reliable data on lower stratum families can be measured. We cannot, quite simply, persist in treating the incomplete and tentative family information derived from manorial records as if it were thorough and definitive. If we cannot recreate the experiences of all peasants, we can recreate—in bold and certain strokes—the lives of selected peasants.

The study, then, of the family and domestic experiences of the medieval peasantry has a very bright future. It will be a less demographic and aggregative future than once expected, but it will be full of extraordinary details about the social experiences of these people. Parish registers and manorial records are radically different sorts of sources, and each contains what the other fundamentally lacks. They cannot be brought into conformity, and the records of one cannot be asked to answer precisely the questions posed by the other. But historians will, by exploiting the unique strengths of each type of record, slowly formulate common questions and arrive at integrating answers.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH
CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

⁴³For an example of the usefulness of such microcosmic analyses, see Judith M. Bennett, "The Tie That Binds: Peasant Marriages and Peasant Families in Late Medieval England," forthcoming in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*. This essay analyzes the social ramifications of a single marriage in a fourteenth-century village.