

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Women at Work

(from H. Leyser, *Medieval Women* (London, 1995))

### *Peasant Women*

In the corner of the room farthest from the door there is a very large wooden platform, the height of a table, on which are strewn rags and old clothes. This is the bed where the family sleep. The main difference in the winter between waking and sleeping is the cold. It is warmer sleeping under the rags and on top of the sheep; on the side of the wooden platform are two planks that lift up to make an entrance; every evening the seven family sheep rush into the pen under the bed. When the father returns, there will be seven bodies on the bed and seven sheep underneath.<sup>1</sup>

This is not, as the reader might at first suppose, a description of a medieval English peasant family; it comes from the twentieth-century observations of the writer John Berger who has lived for many years in a peasant community. It is quoted as an illustration of the particular pitfalls of writing about peasants, men or women: how to find an appropriate chronology, on the one hand, how to represent a lifestyle that it is easy to sentimentalise, on the other. Possibly there were sheep under the bed in 1500 as well as in 1066, but we also have to remember that although the population in England had trebled between the Norman Conquest and 1300, it was decimated by the famines and plagues of the fourteenth century. What this might mean for village life can be seen from Cecily Howell's work on Kibworth Harcourt in Leicestershire. Between 1280 and 1340 the same families lived and held land

in the village; by 1390 only sixteen families had been there for more than a few years; by 1440 it was only eight.<sup>2</sup>

Discussion of the English medieval peasant is further bedevilled by the question of definition: who is a peasant? In this chapter I have adopted the usage of Christopher Dyer: 'peasant is a convenient, if rather elastic term to describe many small-scale cultivators.'<sup>3</sup> Even with this broad definition problems arise due to the lack of evidence until the mid thirteenth century, and the controversy surrounding the interpretation of later evidence, in particular manorial court rolls. Further, since no two manors are alike generalisations are especially risky. Historians have by now banished the once favoured notion of an extended medieval kin-group and there is general agreement that the average peasant family was a small conjugal unit consisting only of husband, wife, and no more than two or three children. In the absence of parish records much about the formation of this family remains unclear. The age of marriage in particular is hotly debated. The relationship between number of children and number of pregnancies is another much discussed issue: poor nutrition will have reduced maternal fertility and, of the babies conceived, many will not have come to full term or survived infancy. As far as the older generation were concerned, grandparents were not on the whole expected to live with their married offspring. A settlement of 1258 from Taverham in Norfolk, for example, suggests that while this could still be a possibility it was an arrangement to be viewed with caution: by the terms of this particular agreement a father surrendered his holding to his son and new wife but only on condition that he could reclaim most of it should their life together not work out.

Before marriage, daughters might already have been given land. Whatever the inheritance customs of any particular manor, and however short the supply of land, parents consistently attempted to endow non-inheriting children – daughters quite as much as sons – with at least a smallholding. In a sample of pre-plague land transactions from the manor of Brigstock in Northamptonshire, studied by Judith Bennett, just

<sup>1</sup> John Berger, cited in 'Another Way of Seeing Peasants', *Peasant Studies* (1982), p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> C. Howell, *Land, Family and Inheritance in Transition* (1983).

<sup>3</sup> C. Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c.1200–1520* (1989), p. 22.

over a quarter of grants were to daughters.<sup>4</sup> These grants were not necessarily a form of dowry – they might be made several years before the daughters in question married – nor were they, on the whole, conditional. Cristina Penifader of Brigstock, for example, who married in 1317, had already been given land grants by her father in 1313, 1314, and 1316. Sometimes, on marriage, such land was returned to the natal holdings since the women were now considered to be provided for by their husbands. Bennett has also found examples of single women – who already had some capital and who must therefore have had some years of employment behind them – buying land for themselves.

For a young single woman, earning money in any way that required a significant capital outlay was clearly difficult; few could therefore become brewsters or bakers until later in life. To start with, the single peasant woman was more likely to get a job either as a wage labourer or as a live-in servant. Of the two options, going into service paid less, but it was more secure; wage labour, such as harvesting, might be seasonal, whereas service contracts were made for the year. Service was not, as it would have become by the end of the Middle Ages, a demeaning profession – children might often be described as the servants of their parents. Nor was hiring servants uncommon; it might be beyond the reach of poorer peasants but richer peasants could expect to be able to do so, with the result that there might be little or no difference in social standing between master or mistress and servant. There was likely to be work within a ten- to fifteen-mile radius of home, possibly even in the same village. In Halesowen, Worcestershire, according to Zvi Razi, about 10 per cent of the population were employed locally as servants.<sup>5</sup> In those less prosperous families where only one servant was employed it can reasonably be assumed that he or she would have a variety of tasks to perform; in richer establishments there was more specialisation of labour and skills might entail laundry- or dairy-work. A dairymaid's duties are described in the thirteenth-century text known as *Fleta*:

<sup>4</sup> J. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Z. Razi, *Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish: Economy, Society and Demography in Halesowen, 1270–1400* (1980).

It is the duty of the dairy-maid to receive from the reeve, by written indenture, the utensils belonging to her office and when she leaves to return them by the same indenture, in which the date of her commencing work is stated. Further, it is her business to receive milk, against a tally, by the number of gallons, and to make cheese and butter, and to take charge of the poultry and frequently to render account and to answer to the bailiff and the reeve for the produce resulting therefrom ... And when she can reasonably find leisure for such things, it is her business to winnow, to cover the fire and do similar odd jobs.<sup>6</sup>

Once married, a woman was unlikely to remain in service. It should not, of course, be assumed that every woman did marry, though it is generally reckoned that there were few who did not; estimates for Lincolnshire villages of the late thirteenth century suggest a celibate population of only 4 per cent. As a married woman, the peasant wife assumed a new identity as the *materfamilias*, the mother of the family, or *domina domus*, mistress of the house. As the lord's tenant she had a part to play in the household economy, with obligations, such as harvest boon work, to fulfil; her special responsibilities were likely to have included milking cows, sheep-shearing, the care of poultry and pigs and the growing of vegetables and herbs. There was no rigid division of labour along gendered lines and no tasks a peasant woman might not be called on to perform. She was a full partner in the management of the holding; husband and wife might work quite literally as a team, as in *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*, the wife goading the oxen as the husband guided the plough 'with a long ox goad / In a clouted coat cut short to the knee / Wrapped in a winnowing sheet to keep out the weather.' Lest such teamwork should seem no more than a poetic image, bearing little relation to reality, we should consider the implications of Richard Smith's work showing how the peasantry, from the late thirteenth century, came to adopt the practice of holding land in jointure, so that in the event of her husband's death land passed automatically to the wife, a recognition of shared enterprise.<sup>7</sup> From late-fifteenth-century Sussex, moreover, we have evidence of husbands and wives buying property together, the mortgage being paid off in part by the woman's

<sup>6</sup> Trans. E. Amt, *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe* (1993), p. 182.

<sup>7</sup> R. M. Smith, 'Women's Property Rights under Customary Law: Some Developments in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 36 (1986), pp. 165–94.

work. In 1467, for example, William and Juliana Greenstreet bought two cottages and half an acre from Richard Crane. They promised to pay him £3 over the next three years. One of the houses was used as an ale-house; the brewer was Juliana.

The overworked peasant woman is a figure familiar through satire, folk-tale and clerical polemic. *Holy Maidenhood*, in advocating a life of virginity, asks: 'What kind of position is the wife in who when she comes in, hears her child screaming, sees the cat at the flitch and the dog at the hide, her loaf burning on the hearth and her calf sucking, the pot boiling over into the fire – and her husband complaining.'<sup>8</sup> It is therefore perhaps worth making the point that the household was not expected to be self-sufficient. Many women would make butter and cheese, but buy bread and ale (often from other women); they would spin, but they would go to market to buy cloth. And they might have time, despite – or through – their occupations in house and garden, to make some money as well.

Women who brewed occupy a large place in any discussion of women's work. Until the fourteenth century, when hops were introduced and beer could be made, the most common beverage was ale, made from barley. No-one drank water since, as Judith Bennett remarks it was regarded as unhealthy.<sup>9</sup> Ale could only be kept for a few days before going sour so fresh supplies were constantly needed. The thirteenth-century Assize of Bread and Ale had laid down national standards but the assize was soon used as a way of licensing ale-makers rather than simply controlling the quality of their product. In Brigstock, ale-tasters met every three weeks and, if necessary, fined the ale-sellers of the manor. Whereas nearly every brewer in Brigstock was a married woman, the ale-tasters were all men (though female ale-tasters elsewhere are not unknown). The same was true of Wakefield in Yorkshire. Brewing was laborious and time-consuming but it could be fitted in around other household duties; it required no regular commitment. Many brewsters, judging from the court rolls, brewed only intermittently, depending on financial need and their other occupations. No particular prestige or stigma seems to have

been at stake – brewers came from both poor and relatively prosperous families. On the other hand, there were established networks of brewing families: a newcomer to Brigstock had little hope of setting up an ale-shop, which suggests that a certain respectability was needed to fill what was after all a socially important role.

Just how many ale-wives were at work in any village can be difficult to assess because of the practice of registering amercements in the husband's name, irrespective of who was the actual brewer. Helena Graham's recent study of the manor of Alrewas in Staffordshire cites by way of example the case of William Shepherd who was regularly amerced even though it is evident from the details of a particular case that the person making the ale was in fact his wife.<sup>10</sup> This is not to claim anything like a female monopoly for brewing; in areas such as Iwer in Buckinghamshire, where animal husbandry left men with more time on their hands than in forested Brigstock, there were correspondingly more male brewers than females. Among ale-wives Margery Kempe (see pp. 164–5 below) has a particular claim to fame, despite the failure of her enterprise, but there were also male brewers of considerable wealth and standing, and it was with them that the future was to lie. When beer took over from ale, as far as its production was concerned, women lost out. Beer, unlike ale, could be kept; it could therefore be made in large quantities and there was no longer any necessity for small-scale home brewing. In a similar fashion, the thirteenth-century 'advance' from spindles to spinning wheels was not necessarily in the interests of women. Spinning wheels speeded up work, but, unlike spindles, they could not be carried around. They were an unsociable invention that would keep a woman in her place in a hitherto unaccustomed manner.

Spinning apart, there was much gregarious business to be done. Bread might be baked in a communal oven; clothes washed in the village stream. Surplus produce might be taken by peasant women to local markets. By the thirteenth century a weekly market was likely to be within reach of most villagers. Alrewas, for example, since 1290 had held the right to a market every Tuesday. The butchers and bakers at this market were

<sup>8</sup> Trans. B. Millet and J. Wogan-Brown, *Medieval English Prose for Women*, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> J. Bennett, 'The Village Ale-Wife: Women and Brewing in Fourteenth-Century England', in B. Hanawalt (ed.), *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe* (1986), p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> H. Graham, '“A Woman's Work ...”: Labour and Gender in the Late Medieval Countryside', in P. J. P. Goldberg (ed.), *Woman is a Worthy Wight*, p. 141.

men but the small traders, the transters or regrators, were predominantly female. Like the ale-wives of Brigstock, women transters seldom appear as professionals; they turn up from time to time when need or opportunity arises. There is, all the same, some specialisation in what they sell. Eggs, poultry and dairy produce feature regularly among their wares; an ordinance from Lynn is directed to the 'mylk wymen'; an 'egg-monger' molested on her way to market at Winchester becomes the object of a miracle by St Swithun (he 'mends' her broken eggs). It is, however, difficult to know how many of these market traders were countrywomen in town for the day, and how many were forestallers, that is, townswomen selling at a profit produce they had previously gone out into the country to buy.

Women wage-labourers took on work in the same casual way. They could be found doing all manner of jobs – haymaking, mowing, breaking stones for road-mending – but such work was considered as casual labour rather than full-time employment. Their rates of pay were sometimes, but not always, lower than men's. We have evidence of both women thatchers and reapers being paid the same as men; we also know of cases where women were clearly regarded as cheap labour and paid accordingly. Walter of Henley's husbandry manual of the thirteenth century recommended keeping a woman for stock-taking since 'it is always advisable to have a woman there for much less money than a man would take'. The shortage of labour following the Black Death undoubtedly gave women a bargaining power they had previously lacked, though attempts were made to curb this. The Statute of Cambridge, for example (1388), laid down six shillings as the maximum annual wage for dairymaids or 'women labourers'; shepherds and carters, on the other hand, at the top of the scale got ten shillings.

Despite regional differences in the nature of the work of peasant wives there is always a consistent pattern. Work is adapted to suit family circumstances. Married women derive their work identity from their status as wives rather than from any other jobs they may take on; the tasks they take up are likely to be those left over by men. We must also remember that whatever the economic contribution of the peasant woman to her household she remained, as far as the governing of her community was concerned, an outsider. The wives of Brig-

stock, as Judith Bennett has made clear, on marriage relinquished any independence they had previously enjoyed. Those who had previously attended court as tenants now left such business to their husbands. There was no call for their regular attendance; there were no official positions of responsibility open to them. Women did not join tithings, the basic peace-keeping units of any village; they did not act as reeves or jurors and only occasionally acted as pledges. Although it is possible that in manors other than Brigstock, for instance at Broughton (Huntingdonshire), women may have had rather more autonomy in the management of property they had brought into their marriage, office-holding was still not an option. Our concern must be not so much to register late-twentieth-century dismay at this state of affairs as to question whether this exclusion was felt as a grievance by peasant women themselves.

Whatever their legal disabilities, peasant women should not be pictured meekly straining their ale, or bundling up spare leeks. Agnes, wife of John Sadeler, a leader of the rising of peasants at Romsley in Worcestershire in 1386, may have been exceptional but it is worth bearing in mind the significant part women would come to play in sixteenth-century grain riots and in the protests against enclosure.<sup>11</sup> Such collective action was not without precedent. The women of Swaffham in Norfolk in the late fifteenth century were counted on to join, vociferously, in the proposed campaign against the Duke of Suffolk's agents. Likewise, any reading of court rolls will suggest both the range of activities and the assertiveness of peasant women. By way of example we may look at the Wakefield court rolls of 1348–50 recently analysed by Helen Jewell.<sup>12</sup>

At Wakefield, ale-related fines were by far the commonest cause for women to appear before the court but other offences reveal a variety of occupations. Women lent money: Alice de Sourby was owed 20½d from a loan; Alice del Lone, 12½d; Margaret, daughter of Ellen, 2s 2d. They not only sold cloth and oats but also livestock: Alice, wife of William de Hallestead, had sold two oxen to Richard, son of John; William del

<sup>11</sup> R. Houlbrooke, 'Women's Social Life and Common Action in England from the Fifteenth Century to the Eve of the Civil War, *Continuity and Change* 1 (1986), pp. 171–89.

<sup>12</sup> H. Jewell, 'Women at the Courts of the Manor of Wakefield, 1348–1350', *Northern History* 26 (1990), pp. 59–81.

Bothem had bought a horse from Margery de Wolrunwall. Both Richard and William were being sued for money outstanding. Women raised the hue and cry, a procedure of complaint against wrongdoings whereby a false accusation will lead to the fining of the accuser rather than the accused. Out of thirteen recorded cases, in only four was the woman's complaint not upheld; there is no evidence here of any bias against women's testimony. Women themselves were by no means peaceful: Matilda, wife of Robert of Combirworth, was fined 3d for drawing blood from Magota, daughter of John; Agnes, wife of William Walker, was fined 12d for drawing blood from William de Pudsay. In an earlier Wakefield roll the case comes up of Amabel the Cowkeeper who in defence of the cattle in her care had fractured a man's skull. 'Disadvantaged', as Jewell points out, is not to be equated with 'downtrodden'.

'Disadvantaged' still begs the question: from whose viewpoint? Continental historians writing about the medieval peasantry have taken a very different approach from their British counterparts. Robert Fossier, for example, sees the central Middle Ages as a time when peasant women came into their own. The emergence of settled villages, populated by nuclear families, and the building of long houses with a central hearth brought women quite literally into the middle of things: 'The return of the womenfolk to their own roof is surely the fundamental reason for the great increase in female influence that is characteristic of the years 1100-1300 ... The presence of the hearth within the house created an entirely new situation as far as peasant attitudes were concerned ... The women who tended the fire drew from it their power and influence.' ... 'in the village the man is in the fields or the woods: everything else is in the woman's hands and it is impossible to ignore this fact.'<sup>13</sup>

Long houses were the most usual form of peasant housing in England; Fossier bases much of his argument on the excavations at Wharram Percy in Yorkshire. Werner Rosener, in his work on the medieval peasant, quotes the late-eighteenth-century philosopher Justus Moser's opinion of such houses in Northern Germany:

The house of the common peasant is so perfect in its floor-plan that it can hardly be improved and can be taken as a model. The hearth is

situated almost in the centre of the house, and is so placed that the peasant's wife, who spends most of her time sitting and working there, can see everything at once. No other type of building has such an ideal yet comfortable vantage point. Without having to get up from her chair, she can overlook three doors, greet people entering the house, offer them a seat, while keeping an eye on her children, servants, horses and cows, tending cellars and bedrooms, and get on with her spinning and cooking. Her bed is just behind the hearth, and from there she can exercise the same supervision, watching her servants, getting up for work or going to bed, listening to the cattle feeding and keeping an eye on the cellar and other rooms. Each task is linked in a chain with the others.<sup>14</sup>

Moser's peasant is perhaps unusually sedentary; but the scene evoked of the *domina domus*, however idealised it is, may still tell us something about the role of the peasant woman. If not, at the least it may provoke us to ask why our sources are so silent about precisely the kind of activities from which peasant women of other times and places have derived their power.

Peasant women in medieval England, as elsewhere, were responsible for cooking and washing; this in turn gave them the duties of keeping the fire alive, of fetching water and of going to the washing place. Washing, in particular, seems to be a job only done by women; in aristocratic households in medieval England, the one servant certain to be a woman was the laundress. Whether we also look at thirteenth-century Spain, nineteenth-century Brittany, or twentieth-century Portugal we find that food, fire, water, washing, all laden with symbolism are intimately bound up with perceptions of women, with their roles and with recognisably 'feminine' space. In Alto Minho, Portugal, where Joao de Pina-Cabral has found constant conflict and ambiguity in gender roles, the fireplace is 'the sacred core of the peasant household ...'<sup>15</sup> The power of fire is recognised as both good and evil; it purifies as well as destroys. Rituals connect not only fire with food, in particular bread, but also with birth; it is essential that the umbilical cord of any newborn baby be burned in the household fireplace as a way of destroying what is perceived to be its antisocial origins. Women and men in Alto Minho 'participate jointly' in agricultural tasks but here, as elsewhere, washing is

<sup>13</sup> R. Fossier, *Peasant Life in the Medieval West* (1988), pp. 68-9; 18.

<sup>14</sup> W. Rosener, *Peasants in the Middle Ages* (1992), p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> J. de Pina-Cabral, *Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve* (1986), p. 39.

one of the few things only a woman can do. No man ever goes near women while they are washing clothes. The washing place is women's territory; it is where they exchange news; it is, as in Brittany, the women's court. According to a Breton folklorist

The washing is rinsed, twisted, and beaten at the wash-house where the tongues are quite as active as the washer-woman's beetles; it is the seat of feminine justice with little mercy for the men-folk. Soaped from head to foot, soaped again, and rinsed down, they go through some bad times...

And again,

The wash-house is one of the principal places of gossip in our region. Women of all ages meet there and soaping and beating their linen seems only a secondary activity, so enthusiastically do they exchange scandal, and tell each other of the loves, marriages, births and other major events of the district.<sup>16</sup>

In medieval Spain, in northern Castile, according to customs studied by Heath Dillard, 'any bridge over water that was used as an exit from a town was supposed to be at least wide enough for two women and their jugs ... to pass side by side'.<sup>17</sup> Springs and streams were not places where men were expected to be; thus at Plasencia, women were not allowed to act as witnesses in disputes – unless they had occurred at springs or bakeries.

'Women's tongues' are, of course, the ready butt of medieval misogyny: it was something of a commonplace that women were garrulous and talked more than men because their bodies were wetter so their tongues slipped around more easily in their mouths. It may be worth considering this particular insult in the context of women washing and gossiping. Gossipers are feared and reviled because of the power of their words. If we return to John Berger we find in his *Pig Earth* that it is gossip which gives identity to a community: 'Every village's portrait of itself is constructed ... out of words, spoken and remembered: out of opinions, stories, eye-witness reports, legends, comments and hearsay. And it is a continuous portrait; work on it never stops'; 'the function of ... gossip ... is to allow the

whole village to define itself'.<sup>18</sup> Whether this was also true in medieval England we cannot know; but it may be worth considering. Women – and, it must be said, men too – appear regularly in court rolls faced with defamation charges. Defamation mattered. The defamation fines in the rolls of Warboys in Huntingdonshire, though of average rate, are assessed with greater regularity than those for assault.

We may leave the peasant women on firmer ground. Time and again they appear in court rolls for illegal gleaning, sometimes combined with petty theft. In 1313, for example, in Warboys we find such entries: 'they say that Agnes Malitraz does not deserve to stay in the village because she gleans wrongly taking sheaves and other small things; therefore she is prohibited the village'; 'and they say that Eleanor Baroun is of the same sort; therefore she is prohibited the village'.<sup>19</sup> In so far as women like Agnes and Eleanor moved on to try their luck in towns we will meet them again, but we should first consider briefly the problem of peasant women, poverty and crime.

Differences in peasant wealth were very great: the richest peasant families of Halesowen, according to Zvi Razi, might have 25–30 acres of arable; the poorest had to make do with a quarter of that or even less. They were unlikely to have animals beyond some poultry and maybe a sheep or a pig. For such, illegal gleaning could be a necessity. By no means all crimes committed by women can be attributed to poverty but, as the work of Barbara Hanawalt has shown, although women feature less frequently than men in medieval criminal records, when they do they are more likely to have committed petty theft than any other crime. What they steal is primarily food, clothing and household goods, grain and also vegetables, taken by night, from the gardens of neighbours.<sup>20</sup> (Even one of the servants of the holy woman Christina of Markyate could not resist pinching salad ingredients from a nearby garden. Some crimes, on the other hand, were on a professional scale, even family concerns. More typical is the plight of Alice de Schischurst of Halesowen; declared 'persona non grata' in

<sup>18</sup> J. Berger, *Pig-Earth* (1979), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> For Warboys, see J. A. Raftis, *Warboys: Two Hundred Years in the Life of an English Medieval Village* (1974).

<sup>20</sup> B. Hanawalt, 'The Peasant Family and Crime in Fourteenth Century England', *Journal of British Studies* 13, no. 2 (1974), pp. 1–18.

<sup>16</sup> M. Segalen, *Love and Power in the Peasant Family* (1983), pp. 138–9.

<sup>17</sup> H. Dillard, *Daughters of the Reconquest* (1984), p. 150.

1275, Alice managed to find refuge for a further year, but then she stole a measure of corn and half a measure of peas, set her house on fire and fled. A few years earlier, an old woman, Sabillia, had spent the day begging for bread. On her way home she slipped into a stream and drowned. There is no need to believe the chronicle report that during the great famine of the early fourteenth century mothers ate their babies in order to register the poverty and desperation of women like Alice or Sabillia. Nor do we need to construct any particularly vicious system of patriarchy to imagine that it was peasant women such as they who in those years would have suffered the most.

### Townswomen

The distinction between town and country was not as sharp in medieval England as it is today. Within the boundaries of any borough might be plots of land where burgesses would keep horses and sheep, their town gardens housing their hens and pigs. Town wives, like their country counterparts, cared for such livestock; frequently, too, they brewed ale, as peasant women did, though since courts in towns, as in villages, levied fines in a husband's name, the identity of the family's brewer is often hidden. Despite this overlap, town life was otherwise based on trade and manufacturing and it was within this economy that many women hoped to find themselves a niche.

In the hard-pressed years of the late thirteenth century, towns were already drawing in women from the surrounding countryside. Such women came, often as illegal immigrants, hoping they could set themselves up as traders; frequently the gamble paid off and they stayed. After the Black Death, the numbers of migrating women increased still further so that by the later Middle Ages it was quite possible for towns to have more women living in them than men. This has been clearly demonstrated in Yorkshire by Jeremy Goldberg through his analysis of poll tax returns.<sup>21</sup>

The right to trade in a town without paying market tolls was bestowed only on those who had the liberty of a borough; but this was an expensive privilege, carefully monitored and guarded. Men and women, but mostly the latter, therefore

attempted to bypass the regulations and to slip into boroughs unnoticed. In Halesowen, the Shropshire borough studied by Rodney Hilton, about three-quarters of those charged with lodging illegal immigrants between 1293 and 1349 had sheltered women.<sup>22</sup> Three such illegal immigrants were the sisters Alice, Cristina and Juliana from the neighbouring hamlet of Illey, all of whom were fined for dishonest trading. Alice, presumably the eldest, was the first to be charged, in 1281; her sisters, undeterred, followed in her wake. Accusations against them include trading without permission, selling flour and ale in false measures and forestalling. Both Juliana and Cristina had children, but whether they had husbands is unclear. In 1317 Juliana appears in the record charged with sheltering her daughter Margery, a stealer of sheaves.

The late thirteenth century and early fourteenth century saw what Goldberg has described as a 'feminisation of poverty' that was particularly acute in towns.<sup>23</sup> This is not to say that men did not suffer too; in 1322, a crowd seeking alms from Dominican monks in London got crushed to death; twenty-six were women, twenty-nine men. But it remains clear that a significant proportion of women lived on the margins of town life, treading a fine line between poverty and destitution. Such women clustered together in suburbs and poorer neighbourhoods, sharing houses, beds and strategies for survival.

What we do not know is at what point (if at all) such alliances of poor women merit the name of beguinages. Beguinages, groups of women living together to share both work and spirituality, are known in the Low Countries from the thirteenth century. They never appear by that name in England; Norman Tanner considers the small groups of women living together in late-medieval Norwich in two of the city's tenements to be related to the movement, but he also thinks that Norwich is unusual in this respect.<sup>24</sup> It is worth bearing in mind that at least some of the women known to be living together in the poorer parts of other towns, as, for example, at Bootham in the suburbs of York, or in Winchester where a number were employed by St Mary's Abbey, may

<sup>22</sup> R. Hilton, 'Small Town Society in England before the Black Death', *Past and Present* 105 (1984), pp. 53-78.

<sup>23</sup> P. J. P. Goldberg, 'The Public and the Private: Women in the Pre-Plague Economy' in P. R. Coss and S. Lloyd (eds), *Thirteenth Century England* 111 (1991), pp. 75-89.

<sup>24</sup> N. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, 1370-1532* (1984), p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520* (1992).

have shared a purpose as well as their poverty. Economic and spiritual needs do not have to be incompatible. Roberta Gilchrist has recently suggested that the houses of charity known as the *maisons dieux* in York may have resembled beguinages. She suggests as an example the community of poor women living in the house of Cecily Plater in St Andrewgate, who were left 6s 8d by Thomas de Kent in 1397; in 1532 there was still such a community in St Andrewgate, the recipients this time of 3 shillings from the will of Leonard Shaw.<sup>25</sup>

For many of the women who moved from country to town, finding accommodation was not the problem: a large number of single women came as living-in servants. Servants, of whom just under a half were likely to be women, might account for a third of a town's population by the late fourteenth century. Service was not seen as a lifetime vocation but rather as an appropriate occupation to be taken up between adolescence and marriage. Both the skills and finance necessary for setting up a household might thereby be acquired and, since servants frequently ended up marrying each other, so too might a partner.

For those servants who were apprentices there were far more opportunities in towns than in the country. Apprenticeship differed from 'normal' service in that specialised training was involved, together with a lengthy contract, usually of seven years. Formal apprenticeship, however, was only rarely an option for women. In Exeter, for example, apprenticeship gave entry to the freedom of the city, but since women were not allowed this privilege they could not become recognised apprentices. What evidence there is for female apprenticeship centres around London, particularly its silk trade, an occupation uniquely restricted to women, but even in London it is probable that there were more women apprentices than show up in the records. Barbara Hanawalt, in her recent study *Growing up in Medieval London*, has found that women apprentices were seldom enrolled as such in the city's records, possibly because there were no female guilds. None the less, the statutes of the city legislated equally for male and female apprentices, and provision was also made for those women

<sup>25</sup> R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture* (1994), pp. 170–2; for the bequests, see P. H. Cullum, "And Her Name was Charite", in P. J. P. Goldberg (ed.), *Woman is a Worthy Wight*, p. 209, n. 120.

who themselves needed to employ apprentices to follow their 'mistry'. Apprenticeship arrangements made with women were sometimes more flexible and less formal than strictly allowed by custom. The daughter of John Catour of Reading, apprenticed in the mid-fourteenth century to a London embroiderer who allegedly ill-treated her, was, on examination of the case, found to be apprenticed for only five years rather than seven and her master had not registered her. Judging from other contracts made with women apprentices, it seems to have been envisaged that they might not always wish to complete their period of training. Some contracts allowed for this eventuality; a woman wanting to end her contract in order to marry could buy her way out for an agreed sum.

In the hierarchy of service, then, apprenticeship stood high; at the other end of the scale we may place those women who came to towns with expectations of finding a livelihood but with no prior arrangements or contacts. Hanawalt cites the example of a certain Joan Smyth who turned up on the doorstep of Robert Mascall of Aldenham 'in poor and simple array and almost perished for want of sustenance'. Joan was lucky; Robert took her in, 'having pity and out of alms more than any other reason', and he employed her for the next three years.<sup>26</sup> Such women were, of course, particularly vulnerable both to financial and sexual exploitation. So too were the very young: twelve was a common age for starting service. Added security was to be found in family arrangements: nieces might serve aunts and uncles, sisters might succeed each other in any household; brothers who already knew the lie of the land might report back on favourable posts.

Hiring fairs were held regularly throughout the country, often on Quarter Days. In Yorkshire, Martinmas fairs were customary but in other parts of the country Christmas, or St John the Baptist's Day, was preferred. Whatever the date, in line with the provision of the Statute of Labourers (1351) contracts were expected to last for twelve months and could often be renewed, though it was usual after a year or two for a servant to look for another post. Rates of pay varied; some women received wages, others only board and lodging. An interesting fifteenth-century case is that of Alice Shevington of London, hired at the rate of 16 shillings a year, who began

<sup>26</sup> B. Hanawalt, *Growing up in Medieval London* (1994), p. 176.

By the end of the fifteenth century however, the days of licensed brothels were numbered; they would be finally closed in 1546. Signs of a new climate were already evident in the Coventry ordinance of 1492 outlawing brothels and prostitution. 'Senglewoman' in future were 'to go into service until they be married'. Citizens, anxious for the moral well-being of their city, left dowries for poor brides and their household possessions to young couples to help them set up home. In contrast with the marriage and employment trends of earlier decades this new concern to domesticate young women is worth examining and, in particular, the hypothesis proposed by Jeremy Goldberg, based on evidence from Yorkshire, in his *Women, Work and Life Cycle*.

Goldberg's argument is essentially this: the slow rise in the population after the Black Death is to be attributed to a new-found capacity on the part of women to earn a satisfactory living for themselves. Not only did this economic independence give women the opportunity to develop a work identity for themselves; it made them both choosier about whom to marry and delayed the event; some even chose to remain single all their lives. As evidence of this parity, created by the shortage of labour and a booming post-plague economy, Goldberg cites the deposition in a matrimonial cause of a Yorkshire saddler: 'that Thomas did not surpass the said Margery in wealth, status or ability, either in respect of her standing in society or her craft, for he understood that just as Thomas was able to support himself from his craft so Margery was able as a servant.' These halcyon days for women came to an end in the late fifteenth century, when economic recession forced women back into marginal positions. A protest in 1461 by Bristol weavers against women workers in their midst was repeated in Norwich in 1511, and there was worse to come. Women once again had little choice but to marry: 'age at marriage *probably* fell, the marriage rate *probably* increased' (author's italics).<sup>30</sup>

The problem with Goldberg's thesis is not so much the fate of women in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – which it would be hard to gainsay – but rather the difficulty of comparison between the pre- and post-plague positions of urban women. We still do not know the age at which most

women were married in thirteenth-century England since there is no earlier equivalent to the poll tax returns of the fourteenth century, but it may already have been comparatively late in life. Moreover, even during Goldberg's 'high point of female economic activity' there were still, as he himself admits, few apprenticeships open to women outside London. Women continued to hold no public role in craft guilds and only one per cent were ever admitted to the freedom of the city of York. Nor do we have to wait for events in Bristol in 1461, or even in Norwich in 1511, for evidence of hostility towards women weavers. Already in 1400 an ordinance from York had declared: 'henceforth no woman of whatever status or condition, shall be put among us to weave, in case they spoil the cloth and jeopardise the name of the craft and its income, unless they have been properly taught and are sufficiently knowledgeable to work in the craft.'

The statute of 1363 that exempted women from having to follow only one trade or craft clearly presupposes and endorses the continuation of a system whereby women will continue to do 'odd jobs'. It may well be, though further work will be needed to substantiate this, that Goldberg's contrast is thus too sharp. On the one hand, women in the post-plague economy can still be seen to be easily expendable; on the other, it may be that in the albeit very different pre-plague conditions their role was greater than is generally allowed. However, it must be acknowledged that Goldberg's thesis has gained recent support from the work of Charles Donahue on marriage litigation in the diocese of York in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the fourteenth century women seem to have been much more eager than men to enforce marriage contracts; in the early fifteenth century they were less persistent in their efforts, arguably because the improved economic climate had made them less dependent on marriage for their livelihood and their identity.<sup>31</sup>

Those who chose never to marry were still, in late medieval England, a very small minority. Often they worked quite literally as 'spinsters' (though this is not, of course, to suggest that all spinsters were unmarried). Carding and combing wool

<sup>30</sup> P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 347.

<sup>31</sup> C. Donahue, 'Female Plaintiffs in Marriage Cases in the Court of York in the Later Middle Ages: What can we learn from the Numbers?', in S. Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (1993), pp. 183–212.

were also, according to Heather Swanson, jobs primarily done by women; weaving, by contrast, was in the hands of men.<sup>32</sup> Looms were costly and they took up space few women had at their disposal. A spinner might not even have her own wheel but would have to hire it. Female textile workers seldom figure among the more affluent section of the working population. They appear rather as objects of charity in the wills of their rich masters. Thus William Crosby, a dyer, left 20 shillings 'to be divided among the poor women working for me, preparing and carding my wool'. William Shipley, a draper (d. 1435), left 6d 'to each poor woman who works and spins for me'. Similarly, 'poor women' may be found in other trades, currying leather, sewing up shoes and gloves, knitting caps. As piece-workers, they represent an elusive and precarious workforce, surfacing from time to time as beneficiaries of the generosity of former masters. For a single woman to attempt to set up a more secure trade of her own required a capital outlay seldom available to her; with rare exceptions the women who prospered in business did so not on their own but as wives and widows.

For women, and for men too, marriage often saw the beginning of a new professional as well as a new familial life. Business from the start could be based on this partnership, the commitment of the wife as essential to the success of the enterprise as the co-operation of the peasant wife to the management of a rural croft. Again this system creates problems for the historian in that it makes it difficult to identify the role of wives. By way of example, Heather Swanson has drawn attention to the Ordinance of Founders of 1390 which stipulated that each master was to have only one apprentice; an exception was made in the case of Giles Bonoyne who was allowed two 'because he has no wife'. The expectation that both wives and daughters would be engaged in the work of the household, whatever it was, goes far towards explaining the wide variety of work carried out by women and the absence of prohibitions on grounds of gender. Traditional roles did not exclude others. A woman might be a huckster selling ale, bread, fish; she might also be an armourer, a book-binder, a merchant, a fletcher. She was not considered too weak to undertake jobs requiring physical strength, such as carrying

<sup>32</sup> H. Swanson, *Medieval Artisans* (1989).

thatch, turves, or tiles, or loading wool on to ships. Very occasionally, her role beside her husband is acknowledged. Thus we hear of the wife of Roger del Grene, Juliana, a comber, who in 1393 also 'practices the craft of saddler with her husband'. As Eileen Power pointed out in her seminal work *Medieval Women*, even guild regulations, which prohibited women from entering trades, allowed for the contributions of wives.<sup>33</sup> The Lincoln Fullers in 1297 demanded that 'no one of craft shall work at wooden bar with a woman unless with wife of master or her handmaid'. In London in 1344 the Girdlers excluded all but wives and daughters from working with them; again in London, in 1372, we find the wives of dyers of leather sworn with their husbands to do their calling.

It was the wife's familiarity with her husband's trade which gave her the expertise to carry it on should she be left a widow (see below, pp. 178–9). On the other hand, in certain circumstances opportunities existed for women to follow paths of their own; if she lived in London and in a number of other towns too – Lincoln, for example, or Exeter – a married woman could choose to adopt the status of *femme sole*. A *femme sole* had full responsibility for the management of her own business – for better or for worse. Whereas, as a wife, a woman was immune from prosecution for debt since by law she had no goods and chattels – they all belonged to her husband – as *femme sole*, a woman had to face charges concerning her business herself. An early-fourteenth-century London ruling, as quoted by Kay Lacey, is as follows:

where a woman *couverte de baron* [i.e. married] follows any craft within the city by herself apart, with which the husband in no way intermeddles, such a woman should be bound as a single woman as to all that concerns her said craft. And if the husband and wife are impleaded, in such case the wife shall plead as a single person in a Court of Record and shall have her law and other advantages by way of plea just as a single woman. And if she is condemned, she shall be committed to prison until she shall have made satisfaction; and neither the husband nor his goods shall in such case be charged or interfered with.<sup>34</sup>

The privileges of the *femme sole* may date, according to

<sup>33</sup> E. Power, *Medieval Women* (1975).

<sup>34</sup> K. E. Lacey, 'Women and Work in Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century London', in L. Charles and L. Duffin (eds), *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England* (1985), p. 43.

Caroline Barron, from as early as the thirteenth century.<sup>35</sup> Many of those taking up the option in London were regrators or hucksters, a predominantly female occupation throughout the country and in fact one regularly operating on the wrong side of the law. In York in 1304 eighteen out of twenty seven regrators charged with malpractice were women. In 1395 complaints were lodged against the women poulterers of Nottingham for overpricing their garlic, flour, salt, butter, cheese and tallow. In 1422 London women were charged with forestalling cheese and butter. It is not clear that in such instances women working as *femmes soles* necessarily had the best of the bargain; their husbands could – and did – repudiate their debts, suggesting that the origins of the status lay rather with the safeguarding of male property than with any concern for female emancipation.

No account of the work of women in towns can fail to mention the activities of Margery Kempe. Celebrated as she is for the exuberance of her religious experiences (to which we shall return in a later chapter), her forays into trade in her native town of Lynn, as she tells them in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, have their own drama. Margery, we may suppose, was a woman with some capital – her father had been mayor of Lynn five times and she goes into business ‘out of pure covetousness’. The brewery which she established was no kitchen enterprise, but a major venture which for three or four years made her ‘one of the greatest brewers in town’. And then things begin to go wrong: ‘when the ale had as fine a head of froth on it as any-one might see, suddenly the froth would go flat, and all the ale was lost in one brewing after another.’ Her servants leave her and Margery, who by now has lost a large sum of money, has to shut up shop. Undeterred, she acquires a servant with two horses and a horse-mill for the purpose of grinding corn, confident that in this way she can make a living – but the horses refuse to co-operate and the servant moved seemingly by a mixture of exasperation and anxiety, reckons Margery is not someone to work for.

Margery’s tribulations in business serve the purpose of curing her of false pride and vanity and setting her on the right path ‘to enter the way of everlasting life’. None the less,

<sup>35</sup> C. Barron, ‘The “Golden Age” of Women in Medieval London’, *Reading Medieval Studies* 15 (1989), pp. 39–40.

it is worth noticing that, in 1438, when Margery is set to finish the dictation of her autobiography, she becomes a member of that prestigious economic body of Lynn, the Guild of the Holy Trinity. Despite her conversion, God and Mammon are not as far apart as all those gallons of flat ale and bushels of unground corn have led us to believe. Throughout her narrative, moreover, Margery does not behave as a woman whose ventures in any way implicate her husband: not only are the debts she incurs described as her own but we also find her taking responsibility for those of her husband. She does so as part of a bargain: *he* is to release her from her marriage debt, the obligation to have sex with him, if *she* pays his bills. Before embarking on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem Margery invites all her husband’s debtors – through an announcement by the parish priest – to come and settle up with her. It is likely that she could afford to do this because of a legacy recently inherited from her father, but, as the mark of a financially independent woman, the action is nonetheless striking.

### The Aristocracy

The popular definition of work as ‘productive activity’ does much to mask and devalue many of the day-to-day occupations with which women have traditionally been associated; this is as true for women of the landed aristocracy and gentry as it is for townswomen and peasants. Comparatively rich, and sometimes very rich, though upper-class women may have been, they were not idle. In the administration of households and estates they had a full part to play; the regular appointment of wives as executors of their husbands’ wills testifies as much to their proven expertise as it does to marital affection. Some women were literally called upon to defend hearth and home when their menfolk were away. One such woman was Margaret Paston who can be found in *The Paston Letters* requisitioning crossbows and poleaxes from her absent husband so that she could defend their home from hostile neighbours; another was the Countess of Chester, left behind by her husband to face the siege of Lincoln Castle during the civil war of the twelfth century between King Stephen and Matilda, daughter of Henry I. When Stephen himself was captured, his wife, also called Matilda, took command, ‘a

woman of subtlety and a man's resolution' leading 'a magnificent body of troops' whom she ordered to 'rage most furiously [around London] with plunder and arson, violence and the sword'.<sup>36</sup>

The everyday activities of such women may have been both less onerous and less exciting than those of their husbands but, for all that, they were still exacting. Although the masculine character of aristocratic households has long been recognised (in the fifteenth century the Earl of Northumberland employed 166 men and only 9 women) the discussion of women's spaces within such establishments is now receiving fresh attention. According to Roberta Gilchrist, excavations at Pickering in North Yorkshire, where Countess Alice, wife of Thomas of Lancaster, ordered lavish new buildings for herself, suggest that increased status was marked by the stricter segregation of women's quarters, so that 'residences of the highest status saw the duplication of households for male and female members of the castle'.<sup>37</sup> A noblewoman was thus likely to have charge of her own household all the time, as well as that of her husband during his many absences. The numbers that made up such households naturally varied according to rank and wealth; few were as large, or indeed as masculine, as the Earl of Northumberland's, although Elizabeth Berkeley, Countess of Warwick in the early fifteenth century, had a household of about fifty, only nine of whom were women. Elizabeth, an heiress in her own right and one who, in a display of independence, kept the income from her natal lands separate from her husband's, in one year spent £511 6s 8d on provisions alone. It was not only Elizabeth's own household that had to be fed; hospitality was expected to be given to family, friends, and as a part of religious practice, to strangers.

The task of providing for the needs of even a relatively modest household was sufficiently daunting to have been described recently as a 'major business enterprise'.<sup>38</sup> Yet it should not be thought that the management of estates and households amounted to no more than provisioning and accounting, however formidable those tasks were, and however skilfully they needed to be executed. Debarred

though they might have been from many more formal positions of authority, women's voices were still heard and heeded on contentious matters. If we look at *The Paston Letters*, in the 1480s we find Margery Paston, her mother-in-law Margaret and a family friend planning a visit to the dowager duchess of Norfolk to ask her to support Margery's husband John in a dispute about land. The idea of the delegation had evidently come from Margery's cousin on the grounds that 'one word of a woman should do more than the words of twenty men'.<sup>39</sup> Knowing the Paston women as we do from their letters gives us no grounds for thinking them to be by nature a peaceable lot. In a patriarchal society even such forceful women as the Pastons occupied a liminal space; but this was space that could nevertheless be used to the advantage of the whole family. As Philippa Maddern has pointed out, the role of the Paston women was crucial in 'the bloodless battles of land transactions, county rumour-mongering and client maintenance'.<sup>40</sup> Any assessment of women's work in medieval society must allow for just this kind of social manoeuvring and bonding which it fell to the lot of women to perform precisely because in other respects their work identity was so labile.

<sup>36</sup> *Deeds of Stephen*, ed. K. Potter (1955), p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> R. Gilchrist, 'Medieval Bodies in the Material World', in S. Kay and M. Rubin (eds), *Framing Medieval Bodies* (1994), p. 53.

<sup>38</sup> J. Ward, *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages* (1992), p. 57.

<sup>39</sup> *Paston Letters*, vol. I, pp. 664–6; cited F. Riddy, 'Women Talking about the Things of God' in C. Meale (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150–1500* (1993), p. 126, n. 85.

<sup>40</sup> P. Maddern, 'Honour among the Pastons: Gender and Integrity in Fifteenth Century English Provincial Society', *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988), p. 366.