

Family, economy and consumption in the medieval English village, c. 1300

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One of the features of the recent historiography of the medieval English economy has been the emphasis upon its commercialisation, the role of the market and the degree to which even lowly individuals were drawn into economic activity which moved beyond the family.¹ In that sense the family, once a mainstay of discussion of the medieval English peasantry, has retreated a little from our view, at least relative to the strong presence in our writing of commercial and economic dealing, as undertaken by a fairly confident, economically and quasi-politically integrated peasantry.² That said, to put it another way, discussion of the family has moved from a consideration of the family as a discrete unit of production and consumption to one in which the family and its members are perceived as integral to wider economies, be that, for instance, in the degree to which individuals and families engage as producers for a wider economy, or as consumers of resources not solely of their own creation. Furthermore, the extent to which the membership of the family was, for example, extended by membership of the household, including live-in servants has, in the last twenty years, become an important theme of the familial and demographic history of the middle ages and one that clearly engages with such issues as market development, the transfer of resources within and beyond the family, and the relationship between town and countryside.³

¹ There is a large and growing literature in this area but some of the more significant and relevant publications are R.H. Britnell, *The commercialisation of English society, 1000-1500* (Cambridge, 1993); C. Dyer, 'The consumer and the market in the later middle ages', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 42 (1989), 305-327., reprinted in C. Dyer, *Everyday life in medieval England* (London: Hambledon, 1994), pp. 257-81; C. Dyer, *An age of transition? Economy and society in England in the later middle ages* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 126-72.

² See, for instance, fairly recent discussions by J. Masschaele, *Peasants, merchants and markets. Inland trade in medieval England, 1150-1350* (Basingstoke, 1997).

³ See, for instance, P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life-cycle in a Medieval Economy. Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520* (Oxford, 1992).

In so far as this discussion of matters relevant to the history of the family has sometimes been conducted in terms which have not always acknowledged the significance of the family *per se*, there clearly remain opportunities for a more careful testing of the relationship of familial associations with external factors, including the market. In the following discussion an attempt will be made to consider some of the ways in which a family economy operated in the medieval countryside and, by extension, to review our conception of a family economy and the parameters of its range of operation. In the context of the present discussion the focus will be upon the ways in which family members consumed their resources and the extent to which that consumption was conditioned by factors external to the immediate family unit.

In a recent collection of essays on the family in early modern England, the editors, in their introduction, remark that ‘within the rural and proto-industrial economy the family home was the base for economic life and all family members, whether men, women or children, were expected to be economically productive’.⁴ While we might cavil over the application of this generalisation, and I will return to some instances which test the same a little later, it is certainly the case that in pre-industrial England family members were most typically the sustaining force for the domestic economy of the individual family and household. I will begin by considering some of the ways in which this operated in the medieval English village before turning to discuss ways in which that relationship, i.e. between family membership and domestic economy, was not wholly applied.

This discussion is set in the context of pre-plague rural England, during a period when population was close to its medieval maximum and a burgeoning rural economy extended the economic opportunities for individuals and for families, but in an

⁴ H. Berry and B. Foyster, ‘Introduction’ in *eadem*, eds, *The family in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 9

economic setting that was fragile and in which significant pressures operated upon resources.⁵ The bulk of source material for the medieval family, at least for peasant families and especially those of the relatively well-to-do customary tenantry, exists in manorial court records as well as ancillary documentation, including taxation records and the records central court jurisdictions, including coroners' courts. Reference will be made to a number of instances drawn from this material, in what is essentially intended as a survey of questions and approaches to the topic of familial economies and changing patterns and regimes of consumption.

I.

The economy of the medieval family: family members as mainstays of the domestic economy

For rural families operating in the medieval west the likelihood that the well-being and security of family members was dependent upon the work of one or two main providers was quite often remote. It is something of a truism, but one with evident substance, to suggest that the family was largely, if not wholly, dependent upon the work of its constituent parts. Certainly, the combined effort of family members aimed at securing the family economy seems reasonably evident and can be approached from a number of directions, including consideration of the day-to-day economy of the family, the role of the family in the accumulation of surplus and the family as core-provider. In all of this, our discussion tends to be focussed upon the family as a unit of resource and, collectively and individually, as producer and provider more than as consumer. In other

⁵ For a recent assessment of these issues for the early fourteenth-century countryside, see B.M.S. Campbell, 'The agrarian problem in the early fourteenth century', *Past and Present* 188 (2005), 3-70.

words, our sources tend to direct us towards what is measurable or at least describable in terms of what a family produces but it is not a simple task to disaggregate either production or consumption within the family or its wider aspects, household and extended family or kin.

In terms of everyday economies, we also tend to think of a division of labour intended to permit the family to operate to its maximum potential. Thus, for instance, it is a standard of the literature to distinguish the work of the family along the lines of gender and of age, with women and the young tending to perform different tasks from, most obviously, adult males. It is typically assumed to have been at moments of crisis and of some upheaval in labour markets that women were drawn more into the male world of work, as in the medieval English post-plague countryside. Thus, for instance, the changing economy of later medieval England, with discrete labouring opportunities for women must, at different moments, have caused adjustment to family and household structures and, with that, an adjustment to allocation of resource within the household. The entry of women into a typically male-dominated labour market, as happened to certain degree in the decades after the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century has chiefly been described in terms reflective of its atypicality.⁶ For the greater part, female employment patterns, within the family and household, were dominated by what we might identify as household chores, including maintenance of the everyday fabric of family life, cooking, childrearing and relatively light agricultural tasks, including gleaning and some of the work involved in the care of livestock.⁷ This is a theme

⁶ See, for instance, S. Bardsley, 'Women's work reconsidered : gender and wage differentiation in late medieval England', *Past and Present*, 165:1 (1999), 3-29 , and the subsequent debate: J. Hatcher, 'Debate : Women's work reconsidered : gender and wage differentiation in late medieval England : comment', *Past and Present*, 173 (2001), 191-8; S. Bardsley, 'Debate: Women's work reconsidered : gender and wage differentiation in late medieval England : reply', *Past and Present*, 173 (2001), 199-202. For an earlier and important contribution, S. Penn, 'Female wage-earners in late fourteenth-century England', *Agricultural History Review*, xxxv (1987), 1-14.

⁷ See, for instance, the essays gathered in P.J.P. Goldberg, ed., *Women in medieval English society* (Stroud, 1997).

explored by Hanawalt in her work on coroners' rolls, which includes evidence arising from the investigation of potentially suspicious or untoward deaths. The record of accidental or sudden and untoward death involving women and female children tends to locate them within or close to the family hearth, and not infrequently their death is associated with domestic chores. By contrast, male deaths, of adults and older boys, occurred more frequently away from home, sometimes the result of what we might be considered male-dominated or exclusively male work.⁸ Literary sources, such as the late fifteenth-century English poem, "Ballad of a tyrannical husband", also make clear the contemporary awareness of the distinct spheres of family employment.⁹

As regards the role of family as a generator of produce and surplus, the modelling of the peasant economy has, as we have already discussed, tended to assume an input into the productivity of the domestic economy which was founded largely upon the efforts of its familial membership. Thus, for example, the labour on the family farm is founded upon the effort of the male members of the household, while labour in this 'core' economic activity is made available through the work of other household members in other areas. Christopher Dyer's model of the farm economy of a substantial midlands tenant, Robert le Kyng, has as its inevitable focus the management of the substantial arable component and Kyng's own input. The family, from its own holding was, according to Dyer's calculations, able to generate a reasonable surplus and one that sustained them against all but the worst years.¹⁰

The family also, of course, served as core provider of assets, the kinds of surpluses discussed in passing above permitting, for instance, individual family members to establish households of their own. In these respects, therefore, we can see the family and its membership consuming, in some form or another, its own product either directly

⁸ B. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound. Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 105-68.

⁹ See, for instance, P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women in England, 1275-1525* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 169-70.

¹⁰ C. Dyer, *Standards of living in the later middle ages* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 110-16.

or indirectly. The capacity of a peasant family to respond in certain ways and to act in particular economic and social contexts inevitably reflected, to a greater or lesser degree, its own resource. Most obviously, inheritance of family land, *post-mortem*, and by pre-mortem gifts of property were central to the life-chances and expectations of the offspring of wealthier peasant families, if not, as we will consider a little more below, for their poorer neighbours. Within families, even those with relatively significant surpluses, not all family members would, of course, benefit to the same degree and distinctions of age and of gender, conditioned by customary rules of inheritance, had a major impact upon the opportunities which family membership afforded the individual. Investment in, *inter alia*, the land market also allowed families or heads of household to establish the kinds of estates which might then be redistributed in kind or in cash at death or prior to death. Richard Smith's investigation of the Suffolk land market on the Bury St Edmunds' manor of Redgrave c. 1300 illustrates the ways in which peasant families might accumulate considerable portfolios of land and then redistribute them, often in extra-familial dealings but with at least the possibility that the transfers also allowed a redistribution of family capital to offspring as pre-mortem gifts.¹¹ We will return to this issue below; for now it is simply sufficient to note that, as is hardly surprising, as well as the potential for different members of rural and peasant society to consume as well as to produce was significantly varied so also, by implication, was the range of choice introduced by such disparities in wealth.

II.

The family economy: exceptions to the 'rule'

¹¹ R.M. Smith, 'Families and their land in an area of partible inheritance: Redgrave, Suffolk 1260-1320', in R.M. Smith (ed.), *Land, kinship and life-cycle* (Cambridge, 1984).

While we might be tempted to think of the family and domestic economy as something of a universal type, it is also, of course, abundantly clear that family units were not discrete, entirely self-sufficient and separated from the outside world. The model of the self-sustaining, or near self-sustaining, family, in a peasant context, might be best applied to the virgater or yardlander, tenant of a holding consistent with the expectations of a reasonably large peasant family, the so-called *terra unius familie*. Even in such circumstances, the family economy was far from isolated, drawing upon an external labour force, engaging in economic activity, buying and selling, paying rent and other obligations, and so on. As Dyer notes, the family economy and its produce might well have included other elements, including the product of female labour, such as brewing and the spinning of yarn.¹² In similar ways, both men and sometimes women might operate as creditors or brokers and factors in other respects, activity that will also have contributed to the manorial economy. Those so involved would then typically combine their farming activity with some other significant economic activity. John Parkgate, a customary tenant on the Westminster Abbey manor of Birdbook (Essex) in the fourteenth century, was also carpenter on the manor's demesne, occasionally working for 90 or more days per year, along with his assistant, possibly his son. It may have been this additional, lucrative work, supported by his family, which allowed him to increase his peasant holding and, for instance, to lease more land.¹³ While some such work may have been intended to supplement the meanest of domestically-generated incomes, it is also clear that at least some rural dwellers were

¹² C. Dyer, *Standards of living in the later middle ages* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 115

¹³ Westminster Abbey Muniments 25469-25497, discussed in P.R. Schofield, 'Land, Family and Inheritance in a later medieval community: Birdbrook, 1292-1412' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1992); see also the reference to the same in D. Farmer, 'Prices and wages, 1350-1500', in E. Miller, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. iii 1350-1500 (Cambridge, 1991), p. 476.

more than capable through their labour of generating a surplus which could be employed in other than sustaining the most basic levels of consumption.

We can also then think of the peasant family, as well as being producers of goods beyond their own immediate requirements, as consumers of other than their own produce in a number of different contexts. The family and its individual members purchased food and other goods additional to their own production, for instance, as documentary and archaeological evidence makes abundantly clear.¹⁴ In this respect, and to return to a theme addressed at the beginning of this paper, the market, including a market in land, which has been subject to a good deal of study in recent years throws into relief the nature of the family economy. A willingness to engage in the market was at one stage deemed to be almost antithetical to a peasant economy; we would however now not disassociate markets from peasants, but instead recognise that market activity challenges one view of the peasant family economy (a quasi self-sustaining model) while at the same time admitting others.¹⁵

In discussing engagement with the market and the consequent relativities of both production and consumption, the size of families is evidently important, as of course is their wealth. Distinctions in family size and form exercised considerable, indeed a fundamental, influence over the ways in which families and individual family members influenced patterns of consumption and production. To begin, the size of the medieval peasant family and its extended and identifiable kin group was in no small degree a measure of its wealth. Zvi Razi described, for Halesowen, the centripetal and centrifugal pressures of richer and poorer peasant families upon their own membership, with the likelihood that poorer families would and could keep their younger family

¹⁴ See, for example Dyer, *Standards of living*, pp. 151-87, and especially, pp. 178-87.

¹⁵ On an earlier view of the role of the peasant family in land transfer and the suggestion that such activity was almost antithetical to a land market, see C.N.L. Brooke and M.M. Postan, *Carte Nativorum, a Peterborough Abbey cartulary of the fourteenth century* (Northants. Record Society, 1960), p. xxxiv.

members close to the hearth remote in comparison to their wealthier neighbours. At Halesowen, it was the wealthier families whose collective resources encouraged, through marriage, inheritance and the purchase of land in a local market for land, a consolidation of their membership, if not in single households then at least in 'laterally extended' kin groups.¹⁶ By contrast, again to follow Razi's examination of the Halesowen rural population, poorer individuals tended to seek their fortunes further afield. In such circumstances, it was the capacity of families to transfer their resources from one member to another which was instrumental in determining family size and the strength of ties to the family hearth. In short, where resources were limited, familial bonds tended to be weakened and family members, including non-inheriting offspring, moved away from the family home in search of new opportunities. The reverse was often the case where resources were greater, the effective consumption or redistribution of the family's resource, in land or capital, allowing family members to remain in relative close proximity to their natal homes.¹⁷

This also, to follow a number of commentators on the medieval English family, effected discrete behaviour in terms of marriage and household formation; on the assumption that household formation was dependent upon the acquisition of necessary resources, poorer and non-inheriting offspring might expect to accumulate property not through inheritance or family gift but through their labour (a so-called 'proletarian' or 'real wages' household formation system). By contrast, the inheritance of property and the opportunity it afforded for marriage and household formation, in a 'peasant' or

¹⁶ Z. Razi, *Life, marriage and death in a medieval parish. Economy, society and demography in Halesowen, 1270-1400* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 84, 142.

¹⁷ Razi, *Life, marriage and death*, pp. 83-5, 140-4; *idem*, 'The myth of the immutable English family', *Past and Present*, 140, 1993, pp. 3-44.

‘niche’ model of household formation, might also allow earlier marriage with positive consequences for fertility and family size.¹⁸

Such differences in household formation systems illustrate the likely differences in terms of the family economy and the capacity of individuals to remain within that economy and to enable it to prosper. If we consider the instance of poorer families in the medieval village, we are aware of their relatively small size and the greater preponderance of two-generational, nuclear families. We might also anticipate that it was the offspring of these families who were obliged to seek their own economic opportunities further afield, perhaps as household and ‘life-cycle’ servants in other neighbouring households or, as likely, at some distance, in towns and other villages or as waged labourers. That such differences, occasioned by distinctions of wealth and family form, had implications both for patterns of production and consumption is, of course, evident. Of particular importance here, we can approach this issue by exploring a number of ways in which distinctions in family size, structure and resource might influence patterns of consumption. In this respect the object is to move beyond the simple and unavoidable point that certain families and individuals were able both to produce and to consume more than did others. Instead, the aim is to examine some of the ways in which distinctions in familial structure and kin support might inform consumption and, by extension, the ways in which consumption patterns might then, conversely, have an impact upon family structure itself.

III.

Elements of peasant consumption

¹⁸ See, for instance, L.R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex 1350-1525*. Cambridge, 1991, pp. 141-8.

As has already been intimated in this discussion, it was not at all beyond the capacity of peasant families to consume goods and services beyond their immediate means of production. Thus, to offer one particular instance, peasant families purchased labour, as numerous references, in nominative listings, wills and disputes over contract to servants and others engaged in work for and within families illustrate.¹⁹ Certainly, when we consider the significance of service in the medieval economy, even in the period before the Black Death heralded a rise in standard of living, we are impressed by its conspicuous presence, even amongst peasant families. Taxation material, especially the later fourteenth-century poll taxes, illustrates the varied sex-ratios between town and countryside, with an apparent concentration of young unmarried women in towns with a higher proportion of males in the countryside.²⁰ Local court records also reveal, often in passing reference, the presence of servants within the households of peasants and their social superiors. So, for example, at Birdbrook, Essex, in the fourteenth century, it is evident that local priests and the more substantial tenants employed servants in a range of tasks, including such various nefarious activities as poaching, fishing and the illegal rescue of seized goods and livestock. Not all of these servants were unrelated to their masters of course, as formulae such as *filius et serviens* and *filia et manipasta* indicate.²¹

Such patterns of consumption reflect the extent to which peasant families enjoyed an expendable surplus and were, for reasons of social capital, economic benefit and so on, prepared to employ that surplus. In this sense, consumption is treated quite broadly as a decision, or obligation, taken by one or more family members as to the distribution of familial resources. While one or two instances have been offered above, including

¹⁹ Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life-cycle*, pp. 158-202.

²⁰ For example, P.J.P. Goldberg, 'Urban identity and the poll taxes of 1377, 1379, and 1381' *Economic History Review*, 43 (1990).

²¹ P.R. Schofield, 'Tenurial change and the availability of customary land in a later medieval community', *Economic History Review*, XLIX, part 2, (1996), pp. 250-67.

investment in higher quality building materials and the employment of servants, 'consumption' includes redistribution of resources within the family in any variety of contexts, including basic food allocation, investment in the education or training of family members, the allocation of living space, and so on. While we will not consider every instance of such potential consuming activity in what follows, we will explore certain instances of such activity as well as its variety in terms of change over time and across some identifiable economic sub-divides within the peasantry. We will, in passing, give some consideration to the particular pressures that may have come to bear upon family economies in the crisis years of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

In the first instance, the capacity of a family to sustain its own membership, or to 'jettison' it, was in no small part dependent upon the kind of resources it could generate. In the ways already mentioned above and outlined by Razi for Halesowen, those households with relatively extensive resources might find room to care for those less able or unable to contribute to the domestic economy. In fact, the capacity and willingness to do so might also be consistent, at least in its degree, with an indication of the consumption choices of individual peasant households and their relative wealth, distinctions reasonably evident in, for example, the retirement and maintenance agreements drawn up between elderly parents and their offspring as well as the provisions, far from easily observed, relating to the care and upbringing of the young children of the family and household.²² It would be, for example, extremely revealing if we had any insight into wet-nursing and weaning practices within the peasant

²² See, for instance, R.M. Smith, 'The Manorial Court and the Elderly Tenant in Late Medieval England', in M. Pelling and R.M. Smith (eds), *Life, Death and the Elderly. Historical Perspectives* (London and New York, 1991); see also above and Razi, *Life, marriage and death*.

household.²³ In similar respects, the preparedness and/or capacity of peasant families to invest in medical care, midwives and other kinds of support, is certainly of relevance. Such choices as regards surplus might also be evident in the treatment of charity and of bequests, a form of disposition which, as with the care of children or the elderly, did not necessarily meet the immediate economic expectations of the family but clearly had other social and emotional benefits. Consumption in this context, as also in other or discrete economic contexts, might also be considered as a kind of investment, an extension of moral credit, conceivably, at least, offered in the hope of some kind of return.

In other respects it would not be appropriate to consider consumption in terms of such choices. While, ultimately, almost all consumption, in terms of an allocation of resources, reflects choice, in circumstances where the opportunities for consumption beyond a bare subsistence were limited, decisions in relation to how food and other resources were distributed were inevitably constrained. In this case, consumption and the distribution of resources within families reflected stark choices. This must have been especially the case in the decades either side of 1300 when, as a variety of sources indicate, medieval rural society was threatened with major subsistence crises.²⁴ In such conditions, as some contemporaries noted and most probably with a degree of licence, the bonds that held families together were loosened; at such moments, the preparedness of family members to share their resources, either externally or internally, appears to have been tested. Medieval theologians, as is well known, argued that charity was an

²³ P.R., Schofield, *Peasant and community in medieval England, 1200-1500* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 121-3, 238 for references.

²⁴ See, for instance, W.C. Jordan, *The Great Famine. Northern Europe in the early fourteenth century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); I. Kershaw, *The Great Famine and Agrarian Crisis in England 1315-1322, Past and Present*, 59, 1973; B.M.S. Campbell, 'The agrarian problem in the early fourteenth century', *Past and Present* 188 (2005), pp. 3-70.

obligation which should, as a matter of priority, be distributed within the home.²⁵ In certain extreme circumstances, we are aware of a withdrawal of charity both within and beyond the family and household. Thus, for instance, at moments of severe shortage, especially in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, contemporaries noted a withdrawal of charity, a hardening of attitude towards strangers and, on occasion, a harsh delineation of food allocation even within the family.²⁶ In ways that were not wholly dissimilar but, instead, reflected an overall increase in resources rather than a general reduction in standard of living, and an associated recalculation of charitable obligation, we can also see a withdrawal of charity from certain groups and, as Miri Rubin has shown for later medieval Cambridge, a reallocation of the same resources to those individuals or groups considered to have stronger claims or entitlements.²⁷

In all such circumstances, to a greater or lesser extent, consumption patterns were informed by a mixture of choice and of obligation. Choice was determined by an individual's or a family's will, but was inevitably conditioned and constrained by any number of likely factors, including the capacity to exercise that choice as determined by resources to hand (including money and credit), the availability of things to consume, an active and accessible market, and so on. Choice was also conditioned or constrained by obligation. And obligation was, in turn, clearly influenced by a number of important, but variable and often intersecting elements, including familial duty, the teachings of the church, the expectations of local communities and neighbours, all of which of course were conditioned by, *inter alia*, prevailing economic conditions which might

²⁵ B. Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law. A Sketch of Canonical Theory and its Application in England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), p. 57; also P.R. Schofield, 'Approaching poverty in the medieval countryside', (forthcoming).

²⁶ See, for instance, H.T. Riley, ed., *Johannis de Trokelowe et Henrici de Blaneforde Chronica et Annales* (Rolls Series, 1866), p. 93; also P.R. Schofield, 'The social economy of the medieval village', *Economic History Review* 61 S1 (2008), pp. 38-63; *idem*, 'Respuestas a la carestía y al hambre en el mundo rural inglés en los siglos XIII y XIV', in Hipólito R. Oliva Herrero and Pere Benito I Monclús, eds, *Crisis de Subsistencia y crisis agrarias en la edad media* (Universidad de Sevilla, 2007), pp. 229-43.

²⁷ M. Rubin, *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

themselves be the consequences of other, largely exogenous factors, and so on. That such obligations could then change over time with a consequent impact upon patterns of consumption is obvious in a variety of contexts. We have already seen how obligations attached to charity might vary quite considerably, with attitudes to the undeserving poor stiffening at apparently just the moment that, for considerable sections of society, the opportunities to invest in other forms of consumption were increasing.

Conclusion

It remains difficult in the extreme to examine the extent to which familial constraints over consumption informed an individual's consumption choices. If, as we have seen, the extent to which peasant engagement in markets or in waged labour was, in the medieval English village as elsewhere, clearly conditioned by such factors as familial and local custom, the control of lordship and the capacity of local markets to support economic activity, then it is also evident that these constraints were not infinitely elastic. Where markets failed to protect individual consumers, as they did in the crisis years of the thirteenth and early fourteenth century when grain prices, for instance, escalated enormously, it is far from obvious that individuals could turn to their own families for security. Frequently, of course, they could not. In fact, analysis of, for instance, the peasant land market and investigation of investment in a market for land in the decades either side of c. 1300 has revealed as much about individual ambitions and personal investment strategies as it has the preparedness of family members to share

their resources in a collective enterprise.²⁸ It is though extremely difficult to disaggregate consumption patterns of this kind.

Important in this respect, and a possible test-case of the solidity of familial obligations, is consideration of the extent to which familial ties continued to inform consumption patterns even at a relative distance. Discussion of female employment patterns from later medieval York, for instance, illustrates the ways in which young women and men came into the city in search of employment as household servants, their place in the urban economy a feature of their own life-cycle and the lack of opportunity as heirs within their own natal families.²⁹ To what extent were such non-resident kin, including sons and daughters, employed often at a considerable distance from the natal hearth, prepared to expend some of their income in supporting family members with whom they were no longer resident? Wills, of which relatively few exist for the peasantry before the end of the middle ages, permit some insight into a reallocation of resources within the peasant family and illustrate, at point of death, how far an individual's estate was typically not subject to the whim of the testator but to the expectations of *post-mortem* convention.³⁰ While the few surviving lower status wills from the thirteenth and early fourteenth century would tend to emphasise the significance, at least at point of death and *post-mortem* transfer, of immediate kin, a systematic study of surviving lower status wills might well shed light on the willingness and/or capacity of poorer testators to look beyond their spouses and offspring to more distant kin, including those with whom they were no longer resident but for whom they recognised some level of obligation. If we take one instance, the wills recorded in the London Hustings courts c.

²⁸ See, for instance, Smith, 'Families and their land'; Schofield, 'Social economy'.

²⁹ Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life-cycle*, pp. 280-304, and above, pp. //.

³⁰ See, for instance, the analysis of wills undertaken in J. Beauroy, 'Family patterns and relations of Bishop's Lynn will-makers in the fourteenth century', in L. Bonfield, R. Smith and K. Wrighton, eds, *The world we have gained. Histories of population and social structure* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 23-42. 28-30, 42.

1300, we can glean some, admittedly extremely limited, sense of the degree to which individuals (and the Hustings court admitted all citizens) within the city were conceiving of their post-mortem obligation toward kin, including more distant kin.³¹ Investigation of the bequests recorded in wills for one decade of the Hustings court, 1300-9, suggests that the proportion of bequests made to more distant kin was relatively slight.³² Of course, it is quite possible that, for instance, *pre-mortem* donation of property was more important in such relatively distant relationships than was *post-mortem* transfer of resources, or that the testators sampled in the Hustings courts were not first-generation in-migrants to London. While this fairly crude test cannot therefore be more than lightly suggestive, it does not however add weight to the possibility that in-migrants to towns looked, at least through their wills, to support more distant kin, including those residing elsewhere.³³

In this summary of some of the potential issues associated with the family economy in the medieval English village, it is clear that important issues, including the extent of individual input into the economy and the willingness of individual members to invest

³¹ On the Hustings court see, for instance, C. Barron, *London in the later middle ages. Government and people 1200-1500* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 127-9.

³² Table. Post-mortem property transfers in the Court of Husting, London, 1300-1309:

Identified beneficiaries:	Immediate kin (spouse or offspring)	More distant kin (specified)	Distant kin (unspecified)	Non-kin? (Named beneficiary)	Other, including pious donations
Number of wills including bequests to the identified beneficiaries (%)	173 (46.2)	40 (10.7)	3 (0.8)	62 (16.6)	96 (25.7)

Source: R.R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Wills proved and enrolled in the Court of Husting, London. A.D. 1256 – A.D. 1688*, (2 vols, 1889), i., pp. 144-207.

³³ On observation also to be found in Beuroy, ‘Family patterns and relations of Bishop’s Lynn will-makers’ where it noted that there is little evidence of bequests relating to the place of origin of the urban will-makers of Bishop’s Lynn.

in their families or to seek opportunity elsewhere, may be largely hidden from us. However it is at least possible to consider the potential consequences of such action and to witness in some of the features of the medieval economy and society some at least of the effects. It should be noted, further to this, that while a good deal of the discussion in this chapter has concentrated upon the ways in which family size and the availability of resource helped to influence patterns of consumption, it is also the case that consumption could effect changes in family size, structure and familial resource. This is, perhaps, most evident in terms of service within other families and households. In particular, life-cycle service in other peasant households and, more obviously, urban households, reflected changing consumption patterns of relatively advantaged households and drew upon the sorts of centrifugal effects of lowered resources already discussed earlier in this paper.

In a recent assessment of the family and household economy in later centuries, Ulrich Pfister has, amongst other things, considered the ways in which individual families conditioned their response to the needs of their own domestic economy in ways consistent with the extent and sophistication of the same economy. Thus, for example, women in larger peasant households might adjust their economic activity to coincide with agricultural tasks while the female members of poorer households in the countryside would more typically be identified for day-labour and regular waged employment.³⁴ Further work on the household and family economies of the medieval village may, perhaps above all through micro-studies based on relativities of wealth, illustrate, in the sorts of ways described by Pfister for later periods, the variety of responses open to or forced upon individuals and their families in this period. In the same way, the degree to which individuals and their families were or were not drawn

³⁴ U. Pfister, 'The Proto-Industrial Household Economy: Toward a Formal Analysis', in R.L. Rudolph (ed.), *The European Peasant Family and Society. Historical Studies* (Liverpool, 1995).

into economic relationships and dependencies beyond their own families is a significant aspect in our consideration of the family and rural economy of the period and associated patterns of consumption and production. Issues such as the relevance of waged labour, of processes of commutation, of the extent to which land could be bought and sold beyond the family, of the proximity of urban markets and of the influences drawing members of the family away from the family hearth are all highly relevant to discussion of the economy of the medieval peasant family; they illustrate the variety of ways by which that economy operated and of the sorts and range of factors which served to condition and to explain that variety.