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Plague, patriarchy and 'girl power'

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Introduction

The inspiration for this chapter comes from an earlier contribution, written with Jill Rubery in 1984, which surveyed theories of social reproduction and its relationship to the economy. We argued that the family, notwithstanding its extensive responsibilities for reproducing, training and socialising future workers, had not been established as an interesting, central and dynamic variable for economic analysis (Humphries and Rubery, 1984). Instead, across the whole spectrum of theoretical approaches, from the neoclassical to the Marxist/feminist, broadly similar methodologies dominated. These methodologies fell into two groups: (1) those which envisaged the family system as *absolutely autonomous*, that is, independent of the economy which therefore had to adapt and operate within its constraints; and (2) those which framed the relationship in *reductionist/functionalist* terms and so subsumed the family within the broader economic system. In the paper, we exposed flaws in both perspectives and demonstrated how several influential analyses failed to adhere to one methodology, but often flip-flopped incoherently between positions in order to explain social and economic change.

More constructively, we argued that what was needed was a theoretical approach which saw the organisation of social reproduction, taking place through the family, though in the modern era increasingly buttressed by educational, social and welfare services, as *relatively autonomous*. The system of social reproduction emerged as neither predetermined nor smoothly accommodating of economic changes; it must be understood as changing in response to economic development but itself subject to other powerful forces and in turn influencing

economic trends. Essential to this relative autonomy was the identification of the borderlands between the spheres of production and social reproduction as terrain in which working people pushed back against the pressures of the economic system and sought space to improve their standard of living and exercise control over their own lives.

As a theoretical and position piece the paper has proved durable, providing insight into the co-evolution of economic structures and family life in both the past and the present. For gender scholars, it has proved valuable in understanding changes in the productive activities and family lives of women who mediate between the economy and social reproduction, their allocation of labour time often knitting together the ragged edges of the two spheres. Historically, it has proved particularly useful in analysing the pressures on family structures created by industrialisation, the transition to the so-called 'male breadwinner family structure' and more recently the time-poor, work-rich households of the twenty-first century. This chapter puts the ideas to work to explore another historical era which has been interpreted as emblematic both of the absolute autonomy of the family system and of its functionalist collapse into merely servicing the needs of the economy. The era is that of the demographic decimation caused by the Black Death. The elimination of up to 40 per cent of the labour force was a massive shock from which the economy took centuries to recover, not least because the plague made regular return visits, culling survivors of earlier bouts and ensuring that population was painfully slow to recover. The economic implications of this era have long fascinated historians and recently there has been particular interest in the impact on women's work, opportunities and family lives.

The post-Black Death era has been subject to both absolute autonomy and structuralist-functionalist interpretations, as we will see. It has also been identified as a historical watershed, setting in train the so called 'Little Divergence' whereby north-west Europe, defined loosely as a group of neighbouring economies clustered around the southern shores of the North Sea, Flanders, Brabant, Holland and England, embarked on slow but continuous and relatively reversal-free growth over many centuries, leaving behind an economically stagnant and prone-to-setbacks south and east, exemplified by the once-dominant Italy but including Spain and Portugal and the countries of eastern Europe (Broadberry *et al.*, 2015). The relationship between the household and the economy and women's role within both is crucial to this new account of how the west got rich, and its study illustrates once again a persisting tension between absolute autonomy and structuralist-functionalist interpretations, neither of which provides a satisfactory frame. Seeing the era in terms of the relative autonomy of social reproduction provides

a fresh lens on what are increasingly understood as pivotal developments in our history.

The chapter begins with a brief sketch of the ways in which classic theories of the family are dominated by the perception of industrialisation as the great divide. The pre-industrial era was falsely homogenised and seen as offering a natural and unchallenged fit between the economy and the household. Of course, historians were fully aware that neither medieval nor early modern society was as static as these theories suggested. The section titled 'The Black Death, the Golden Age and women's economic activities' focuses on a cataclysmic event which shattered the calm of the medieval world and had massive reverberations for both production and social reproduction: the Black Death. There is a large and growing literature on the post-Black Death era and specifically the ways in which demographic catastrophe affected women's economic position. The literature is seen to split into two strands with one captured by an absolutely autonomous interpretation of the reorganisation of economic and social reproduction and the other by a structuralist-functionalist account. In the section 'The Black Death, the north-west European marriage pattern and the "Little Divergence"' I show how the latter has been linked to influential readings of the "Little Divergence", providing a woman-centred interpretation of regional variations in long-run growth with north-west Europe, with England as the paradigm case, enjoying small but cumulative growth in advance of a stagnant south and east long before industrialisation. Recent research, including some of my own, is then used to trace how these interpretations suffer from an overly economic theoretical frame and overlook the ways in which both the ruling elite and working people used the possibilities implicit in the shifting tectonic plates of production and reproduction to their own advantage. Women's roles were not cast in stone, but nor did they adapt smoothly to the evolving needs of the economy. Individuals and families sought to exploit new opportunities for their own advantage and to resist adaptations which they regarded with foreboding. They were not always successful, but their agency is at the heart of the case for the relative autonomy of social reproduction. Similarly, the state reacted to secure social control and protect the interests of the landed elite with unintended consequences for gender divisions, reinforcing the subordination of women and inhibiting their economic independence.

Theories of the family–economy interface

Structuralist-functionalist and evolutionary accounts of the household were essentially teleological, arguing back from a known present to a generally

agreed-upon but imprecisely described and dated past. The historical development of the household unfolds as a process of differentiation (Parsons and Bales, 1965). A society undergoing economic change necessarily differentiates its household-based social structure. New institutions such as firms, schools, trade unions and the welfare state perform functions that had previously been undertaken in households. Of these, firms, the specialist units of production, were the most important. Differentiation drew a line between the household and economic activity. Kinship relations also undergo functional specialisation, becoming dominated by a system of small nuclear family units. The modern 'thin' family was adapted to the need for social and geographical mobility. The primary responsibility for household support came to rest on the male head, the 'breadwinner', whose 'job' linked the family to the economy from which it had become separated. The economic transition was accompanied by changes in ideas about decency and moral standards. The division of activities allowed values, such as selfishness and egotism, essential to the success of the modern economy to prevail in the marketplace while others, such as altruism and caring, could survive in the home, where they enabled breadwinners to be rejuvenated and children to be born, raised and socialised. In depicting the changes in the household as successful adaptations to the modern market economy, sociologists, historians and economists construed pre-industrial households as homogeneous, static and traditional.

Women played a role in these accounts, the pre-industrial household providing the space whereby they engaged in the subsistence production of food, clothing and shelter, as well as bearing and raising children and servicing the direct consumption needs of other family members. They could produce for the market but this was usually as part of a household production unit. With the industrial revolution subsistence opportunities shrivelled and work became limited to 'jobs' accessed via a labour market, organised by an employer and located in distinct and separate production sites. Once work required a continuous presence away from home, married women were left behind. Industrialisation represented the major challenge to the hitherto static fit between social reproduction and production, and it was this transition that dominated the theoretical accounts.

Not surprisingly, the depiction of the pre-industrial household and its relationship to the economy as static was consistent with an absolute autonomy interpretation of social reproduction. Gender history was home to a version of pre-industrial experience built around the ideas of patriarchal and biological continuities which were clearly visible in the social, legal and economic arrangements of medieval and early modern societies. Patriarchal continuities ruled in the household sphere but were not seen as problematic in the pre-industrial world of economic stasis. It was only with the appearance of capitalist production

processes, universal labour markets and modern manufacturing that social reproduction was transformed and alongside it women's roles in economy and society.

Both the absolute autonomy and structuralist-functionalist models of the household fell increasingly foul of growing empirical evidence, which suggested that the relationship between industrialisation and the household was more complex than implied. The idea of family history as fundamentally divided by the era of industrialisation was increasingly challenged. Both long-run changes and short-run variations in economic conditions shaped the organisation of social reproduction. Many operated outside the time frame of the industrial revolution. For example, wage dependency, an important underlying cause of the high frequency of small households in the English countryside, long preceded industrialisation, as did those small households. Surprising evidence demonstrated that the English household was not only small and nuclear long before industrialisation but also remarkably homogeneous across time and space, with implications for England's precocious economic development to which we will return.

Consistent with the relatively autonomous thesis, the economy was not alone in shaping and structuring households. There were other powerful forces. Mortality grimly limited family size and shape and contributed to variation across time and space. Cultural factors also mattered. Marriage became associated with the formation of an independent household and contributed to the rarity with which married children lived with parents. These cultural norms were not always and everywhere functional for the smooth operation of the economy.

Moreover, polarising the history of the household into pre- and post-industrial was increasingly out of synch with the revisionist view of the industrial revolution as involving continuity as well as change. The vision of the medieval and early modern economies as placing no new demands on the sphere of social reproduction no longer fit with economic historians' growing evidence that both eras saw significant economic change and many challenges to the relationship between the organisation of the family and the functioning of the economic system. None was more dramatic than the demographic catastrophe of the Black Death.

The Black Death, the Golden Age and women's economic activities

The initial visitation of the Black Death in 1348–49 killed between 30 and 45 per cent of the English population. Recurrences meant that by the 1370s the population had been halved. The result was a severe and prolonged labour shortage widely understood to have accelerated the demise of feudal relations and provided some of the foundation stones for England's unique economic path.

The ways in which the Black Death nailed the coffin of English feudalism remain under discussion but what is not in doubt is that workers, especially but not only in agriculture, enjoyed a massive increase in both nominal and real wages as landowners struggled to recruit and retain labour. '[T]he evidence for a rise in both cash wages and real wages in the second half of the fourteenth century, coinciding with the sudden and sustained population decline ... has been well established' (Penn and Dyer, 1990: 356). Phelps-Brown and Hopkins (1981) calculated that the daily wages in cash of skilled building labourers in Southern England increased by 66 per cent between the 1340s and the 1390s from 3d to around 5d per day while those of the unskilled almost doubled from around 1½d to 3d per day. It was a 'Golden Age' for the English peasantry now extensively calibrated as, for example, in Figure 11.1.

Medievalists have debated the extent to which women shared in this utopia. Some have argued that women's gains were even more marked than those of men as the labour shortage eroded the pre-existing gender division of labour. Women could now find employment in jobs which had earlier been reserved for

Figure 11.1 The real wages of unskilled farm labourers (by decade)

Notes: The real wage is computed as the annual nominal wage divided by the annual cost of a consumption basket (see Humphries and Weisdorf, 2015). The annual wage is obtained by multiplying the daily wage rate by 260 days.

Sources: Wages: Clark (2007). Cost of consumption basket: Allen (<http://nuffield.ox.ac.uk/People/sites/Allen/SiteAssets/Lists/Biography%Sections/EditForm/london.xls>.)

men, migrate to towns to work in the growing textile industries or commercial service centres, and become members of an expanding class of household servants and so enjoy 'a high degree of economic independence' (Goldberg, 1986; 1992; see also Barron, 1989). It is not difficult to see this strand of the literature in terms of a structuralist-functionalist view, with the gendered division of jobs and the patriarchal authority of male heads of households shifting to accommodate the economy's need for labour and specifically the need for workers able and willing to work away from home outside household divisions of labour and lines of authority.

This rosy view did not, however, go unchallenged. Other historians argued that whatever the implications of the Black Death for male workers, the organisation of social reproduction through the household retained women in traditional roles. '[W]omen tended to work in low-skilled, low-paid jobs ... This was true in 1300 and it remained true in 1700' (Bennett, 1988: 278; 1996; Mate, 1998). The rigid grip of the gender division of labour prevented women from seizing or consolidating the opportunities created by the labour shortage. In an influential article, Judith Bennett painted a picture not of decline from a lost 'Golden Age' but of 'new designs embroidered on a cloth of oppression and deprivation' and suggested that 'the presence of continuity presents us with the discomforting possibility that the roots of women's subordination are embedded deeply in ourselves and the men around us' (Bennett, 1988: 279–80). The sphere of social reproduction dictated norms and structures, which the economy could only exploit not change.

A lively debate ensued about the continuities of gender subordination even in a world where labour was at a premium, with feminist historians taking an absolute autonomy view and arguing for the 'triumph of patriarchal structures ... over demographic crisis' (Bardsley, 1999: 29; 2001). Their opponents, in structuralist mode, found it impossible to contemplate a situation where the organisation of the household did not give way to the needs of the economy: 'a situation where women's labour was both excessively cheap and reluctantly and sparingly used by farmers is hard to sustain' (Hatcher, 2001: 195; see also Langdon, 2011; Rigby, 2000).

Empirical case studies from the medieval economy were cited in support of both views. Caroline Barron found that for medieval London 'the picture of the lifestyle of women ... is quite a rosy one; their range of options and prospects differed only slightly from those of the men who shared their level of prosperity' (Barron, 1989: 47–8), though she found the position changing in the course of the sixteenth century, when the resumption of growth in the population militated against the employment of women, a view shared by other authors (see also Casey, 1976; Elliott, 1981). Similarly, P. J. P. Goldberg argued that

throughout the Middle Ages women living in towns could support themselves, though he too suspected that their independence grew more precarious as the fifteenth century drew to a close (Goldberg, 1986). On the other hand, John Langdon in a detailed study of Old Woodstock through the ravages of the Black Death argued that wage structures reflected 'deeply entrenched attitudes among the suppliers and consumers of labour' which kept wages, including the gender pay gap, largely stable (Langdon, 2011: 29). The debate has simmered on, kept alive by fresh empirical interventions which support one reading or another. Even more importantly, it has been seized on by other scholars working on a larger canvas and integrated into a meta-theory of economic growth that surprisingly has women at its centre. Unfortunately, this female-centred account of growth remains trapped between an understanding of the family/household as wholly autonomous or as totally determined by the needs of the economy. The relative autonomy perspective provides a way forward.

The Black Death, the north-west European marriage pattern and the 'Little Divergence'

Demographers had long noted a difference in household functioning and structures across Europe, demarcated by an imaginary line drawn from Trieste in the south to St Petersburg in the north. John Hajnal (1965) had reported how households in the south and east refreshed their labour supplies through marriage, with young couples moving in with the groom's parents, while households in the north and west relied on 'servants', the children of other often unrelated households who circulated within the economy working on a contractual basis and acquiring skills and accumulating wages. Girls as well as boys, women as well as men and the relatively prosperous as well as the poor all participated in this circulation of labour, which according to the demographers fitted structurally with a distinct demographic regime. The widespread practice of living as a servant away from the family of origin accommodated a prolonged adolescence and fostered later marriage. While women in the south and east normally married as teenagers, those in the north and west married much later, well into their twenties, or indeed never married, with the corollary that population growth was restrained. Within this 'north-west European marriage pattern' (NWEMP), as it became known, marriage involved the formation of an independent household, a possibility dependent on prior accumulation by the young couple, requiring in turn a period of time in service earning wages and incidentally gathering experience and learning skills. The elements of the NWEMP fitted together as a structuralist-functionalist pre-industrial system: (prolonged)

life-cycle service, later marriage, accumulation by servants of both sexes and the foundation on this basis of independent nuclear households.

Hajnal emphasised the ways in which women's involvement in life-cycle service broke down patriarchy. 'While in service, women were not under the control of any male relative. They made independent decisions about where to live and work and for which employer' (Hajnal, 1982: 474–5). In this sense, the hypothesis of a NWEMP is a challenge to those gender historians who saw absolutely autonomous patriarchal households as impervious to economic opportunities.

While the elements of the NWEMP all neatly interlock, combining the organisation of production and social reproduction, the system's origins and evolution were not specified. One recent intriguing hypothesis has linked the emergence of the NWEMP to the economic conditions that prevailed in those parts of Europe particularly ravaged by plague. In a key article, Tine de Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden argued that the labour shortage that followed the Black Death resulted in 'a strong increase in real earnings especially for women ... [and] accelerated the general adoption of the NWEMP ... particularly among servants' (2010: 11). De Moor and van Zanden also linked the new economic opportunities for women and their resulting independence to the relatively favourable environment provided by north-west religious, social and political institutions.

In positing this 'girl-powered Little Divergence' (GPLD), De Moor and van Zanden were joined by powerful allies as other authors argued that women's improved position in the post-plague labour market and especially the growth of opportunities as servants in husbandry was further boosted by landowners' response to labour scarcity. The latter involved the relative expansion of *horn*, that is, pastoral agriculture in which it was argued women had a comparative advantage, versus *corn* (generically, grain) production in which it was argued they did not. The shift from arable to pastoral allegedly pushed up female wages and so boosted female labour force participation (Voigtländer and Voth, 2013). Alert readers might notice here the oscillation between a structuralist-functional approach in seeing women unconstrained by pre-existing patriarchal structures in their seizure of the new opportunities and an absolute autonomy biological determinism in thinking women possessed a natural advantage in pastoral agriculture and disadvantage in crop production.

Not only were the origins of the NWEMP in the post-Black Death labour market, but its spread enabled north-west Europe to escape the Malthusian trap that continued to hold other regions to subsistence levels and kick-started continuous and compounded, albeit low-level, growth. Thus Nico Voigtländer and Hans-Joachim Voth see fertility restriction emerging as an indirect consequence of the abundance of land after 1348–50. The Black Death, they argued, raised

'land-labour ratios and thus wages ... raising female employment opportunities outside the peasant household' (Voigtländer and Voth, 2013: 2229). The result was an increased average age at first marriage for women which reduced fertility rates and 'in turn lowered population pressure in a Malthusian setting and helped to keep wages high' (Voigtländer and Voth, 2013: 2260). The Black Death had a silver lining in the north-west's early break with Malthusian stagnation. Women were the key agents in this great escape.

Thus marriage-regulated population and precocious escape from a Malthusian subsistence equilibrium has come to be seen as a distinctive feature of the north-west, which explains why this area began to grow in advance of the rest of Europe, and indeed the world, long before industrialisation. Yet these ideas were primarily theoretical or based on often contentious macroeconomic approaches (Clark, 2007; van Zanden, 2009; Malanima, 2009; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). Other empirical evidence did not always seem to justify the sharp divisions implied in the nomenclature of *divergence* (McCants, 2015). Moreover, the demographic zones do not seem to presage relative economic development in the way predicted (Dennison and Ogilvie, 2014). Yet there is an obvious empirical test. If England escaped a Malthusian trap in the post-plague era because women could earn higher wages as servants and so postponed marriage, there should be evidence in the historical record on remuneration. The problem is that, unlike men's wages which have been extensively documented and measured (see Figure 11.1), there was no comparable wage data for women. The reasons are clear. Women's economic activities are hard to capture. Data on their remuneration is fragmentary and difficult to interpret. Women were more likely paid as part of a team, by task or in kind. Day wages, where they exist, must be compared with annual contracts that usually involved board and lodging for which a value must be imputed. Together with Jacob Weisdorf, I augmented existing collections of data put together by intrepid historians with additional archival research and compiled a wage series for women workers (Humphries and Weisdorf, 2015). Among its uses is the light it throws on the hypothesis of a GPLD.

It is relevant here that there were two distinct forms of female employment: daily wage labour, often on a casual basis, and the annual service central to the NWEMP, which usually involved living-in and so was partially remunerated in the form of room and board. We collected and processed observations related to both types of employment and so provided two separate series: (1) daily wages; and (2) the equivalent remuneration implicit in longer-term contracts (for an account of how we imputed values for board and lodging and dealt with other problems in making the annual data comparable, see Humphries and Weisdorf, 2015: 407–17). Both series relate to unskilled women defined according to the

Figure 11.2 The daily wages of unskilled men and women (by decade)

Notes: This figure shows the nominal day rates of men and women by decade. Women's remunerations are divided into those paid for casual employment and those paid for annual employment. Annual and weekly payments are turned into day rates on the assumption of a five-day work week (totalling 260 working days per year).

Sources: Humphries and Weisdorf, 2015.

Historical International Classification of Occupations (HISCO) and associated social class scheme (HISCLASS). Figure 11.2 presents our main findings in terms of the evolution of both types of female wages (decadal averages are reported in an appendix to the published paper). Male wages are reproduced for comparison. The published paper (Humphries and Weisdorf, 2015) explores these trajectories in comparison with men's wages and for what they imply about the length of the working year. Here my focus is on the implications for the GPLD.

Women's wages and the GPLD

The wage trajectories in the two segments of the female labour market are very different and cast light on how both working households and landlords responded to the post-plague situation and sought to modify the range and type of women's activities, and so shift the interface between production and social reproduction to their advantage. Focusing on the post-plague era, it is clear that women's casual wages enjoyed an almost immediate boost similar though not as large as

that of men, while wages for women in annual service remained stagnant, even allowing generously for the value of perquisites. The rise in casual remuneration made day labour more attractive in comparison with annual service. This gap was recognised by both contemporaries and labour historians who reported that workers in the late Middle Ages preferred employment on a daily or weekly basis because it offered the possibility of higher returns and more leisure (Bailey, 1994: 162; Dyer, 1980: 367–9; Kenyon, 1962; McIntosh, 1986; Poos, 1991: 218–20). Employers, too, would surely have been keen to take up the cheaper ex-annual worker to replace the more expensive day worker. Why movement between types of employment did not erode the gap is a key question.

One obvious consideration is that annual contracts carried with them security of employment. If women were unsure of sufficient casual work for their support, they would be prepared to accept the drawbacks of annual service. Undoubtedly this was partially the case. Several historians have expressed doubts as to whether there was enough employment throughout the calendar year to match servants' earnings in cash and kind (Hatcher, 2011; Langdon, 2011; Poos, 1991). But given that it would only have required half of the year at medieval casual rates to match the annual pay (including the value of board and lodging) in service (Humphries and Weisdorf, 2016: 418–20), young and healthy women might have been persuaded that occasional labouring jobs, in addition to seasonal work in agriculture or opportunities in cloth production, would see them through. A second consideration hinges on the types of women who inhabited the two sectors and the nature of the medieval labour market.

As the term 'life-cycle service' (Laslett, 1965) implies, annual servants were understood to be predominantly younger unmarried women. Living-in after marriage created problems for both servants and employers. Indeed, in the NWEMP it was the exclusion from lucrative service on marriage that prompted women to stay single. Although perhaps the empirical evidence suggests a less crisp mapping between marital status and labour market segment, with plenty of older and most likely married women observed working in service, in general this assumption is supported. But even if older married women were institutionally barred from annual service, they were not confined to working unpaid in the household. In our investigation of wages, we found many *mulieri* or *uxori* (older women) in casual work and so able to take advantage of the booming wages, but they did so in ways which nudged rather than challenged the organisation of social reproduction, for many such women accessed their employment through their husbands, working alongside them in husbandry, trades or crafts, or recruited by them to work for the same employer. They worked in family-based production teams transferred from the household to the fields, forests, mines, forges, building sites, gentry's houses and estates of the medieval economy via

an accommodating labour market. As a result, they took the authority structures of the household into those same workplaces.

One powerful example comes from a unique source: the weekly account of an early fifteenth-century forgemaster, surviving in the records of the Durham Cursitor. The bishops of Durham, in their capacity as Earls Palatine during the Middle Ages, enjoyed the proprietorship of all mines within the bounds of the count palatine of Durham. Such mines were usually farmed out but Bishop Langley in 1408 tried the experiment of smelting and working his own iron. The resulting account roll survived and was transcribed and annotated at the end of the nineteenth century by Gaillard Thomas Lapsley (1899). The accounts record the employment of several workmen paid by the piece from December 1408 to November 1409. The men had clearly defined duties, were paid regularly and their output recorded so that both piece rates and average daily and weekly earnings can be computed. There was probably also a small body of ordinary less-skilled labourers employed under the direction of a 'forman'. Two named women were also employed performing miscellaneous unskilled but onerous tasks which varied from breaking up the ironstone (*petras frangere*) to blowing the bellows (*belowes sufflans*). Although the women's pay varied, at around 2½d per day (Lapsley, 1899: n. 11) it was slightly less than the casual rate but well above the annual rate computed as a daily equivalent according to the Humphries and Weisdorf series (2015: 431). Moreover, the work seems to have been plentiful, although the women did not work continuously.

Hiring was nepotistic. The two women who had access to this economically attractive employment were the wives of the smith and the foreman and although sometimes employed on specific tasks and paid individually, the women were more frequently employed helping their husbands, in which case they received a fixed rate of ½d per *blome*, that is unit, of iron produced. Their help most likely raised the productivity of their husbands and boosted the men's earnings. Finally, although both women feature regularly in the accounts, they did not work continuously, enjoying both the many 'festivals' – that is, idle days of the medieval calendar – and other unexplained absences. Their labour at the forge left some time for them to fulfil their domestic responsibilities in the households of the smith and the foreman.

This one example can be replicated from across the economy: in lead mines; in building repairs; in shepherding; in arable agriculture; in domestic service; and in crafts and trades (for other examples, see Humphries and Weisdorf, 2015: 411). These suggest that women accessing the Golden Age casual labour market often did so as part of a labour unit that was based on the household and so did not grant the independence that threatened patriarchal authority; and although space and time was left for women to complete unpaid work in their

homes, reduced leisure relative to husbands may already have been implied in a medieval double shift. Simultaneously, the participation of such husband and wife teams within wage labour reinforced and perhaps even spread the nuclear family structures from which they emanated.

What, however, stopped younger women from seeking increasingly more lucrative employment in the casual labour market and instead apparently persisting in much less rewarding annual service? The social norms of the era discouraged younger women from hiring themselves by the day and moving from job to job (Roberts, 2005; Speechley, 1999; Whittle, 2005). Mobility and independence branded them as disreputable, even immoral. Annual service was considered more appropriate mainly because contrary to Hajnal's account (see above) it was associated with the maintenance of male authority and young female subordination. Some independent-minded young spinsters resisted the social norms and can be detected in the historical record working for day wages: the 'mayds in the craine' who worked regularly driving machinery via a treadmill on a Chester construction site; and, the women who 'puled flax' or 'brake hemp and swynglye' for the Shuttleworths of Gawthorpe (Harland, 1857: 56; 1857: 61; Rideout, 1928). Such women sought protection from sexual predation and charges of immorality as they roamed in search of employment by working in teams with other women shearing sheep, swingling hemp, digging peats, haymaking, weeding and labouring on construction sites. And often they too also carried the family's lines of authority into the labour market by working in family-based teams in order to combine attractive wages and untarnished reputations. Working alongside fathers, mothers or brothers meant that young women could access day wages while remaining within patriarchal or at least familial oversight.

Thus the post-plague labour shortage undoubtedly put pressure on the conventional social controls, but economic rationality was insufficient to break down the ways in which women were channelled into different sectors of the labour market according to their age, marital status and other circumstances and arbitrage away the casual–annual differential (see Figure 11.2). Understanding why requires attention to a missing piece of the story: the mobilisation of the repressive state apparatus. The persistently low pay of women in annual service was a consequence of the intervention of the medieval state acting in the interests of the landlords with the passing of the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers in 1349 and 1351.

Most economic historians agree that the labourers and artificers who survived the Black Death, including women, sought to take advantage of their scarcity and obtain higher wages for their labour. In England, as elsewhere the ruling class's response to the sudden increase in the peasantry's power was a mix of

concession and repression, with the latter exemplified by legislation to hold wages and prices down to levels prevailing before the plague (Putnam, 1939). While the extent to which the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers was enforced remains debatable, the law's intentions were clear. Firstly, all able-bodied men and women free and bond, without definite means of support, were commanded to accept service at the rate of wages that had existed before the Black Death: the compulsory service clause. Secondly, reapers, mowers and other workmen or servants were forbidden to leave their masters within the term of their contracts, without reasonable cause or permission, and other masters were forbidden to eloin workers or employ runaways: the contract clause. Thirdly, nobody was to give or receive higher wages than were customary: the wages clause (Putnam, 1908). The provisions were intended to prevent workers from exploiting labour scarcity and holding up employers at key moments in crop production. Note that the provisions applied to women as well as men and that the contract was to be by the year or other usual term and *never by the day*.

Even if patchily enforced, these ordinances raised the costs of mobility and involved risks for recalcitrant workers, some of whom were whipped, humiliated in the stocks, returned to vindictive masters and perhaps ultimately cowed. In lists of offenders against the Statute women loom large and were singled out for harsh treatment (Penn, 1987; Putnam, 1908; Thompson, 1904). Moreover, the Statute was used against female harvest workers seeking to exploit the labour scarcity not just for taking excessive wages, but for moving from place to place (Poos, 1991). Evidence suggests that the compulsory service clause was particularly oppressive to women, for '[e]qual numbers of women and men in presentments (court records) probably translated, in the world outside the courtroom, into a practice of compulsory service that was predominantly, perhaps overwhelmingly, female' (Bennett, 2010: 23).

The Statute and Ordinance were not intended to bear down with particular force on women workers but in practice they were bound to do so for the categories they evoked were patriarchal and paternalistic and made women offenders easier to identify and charge. Moreover, these laws gave force to a suspicion of masterless persons, with unmarried women living and working on their own the most mistrusted. This legal prejudice persisted well into the early modern era when there is mounting evidence that it was the young unmarried woman who was most vigorously forced into service (Bennett, 2010; Middleton, 1988; Scott, 1973). Middleton, for example, cites Gregory King's estimate that there were 300,000 women in service in 1695 compared with 260,000 men and concludes that 'the protection which service offered against the uncertainties and irregularity of the labour market may have been extended to rather more women than men, but it did so only by reaffirming their subservient status'

(Middleton, 1988: 32). So, although the authorities' coercion of those 'out of service' back into subordinate employment, and more generally the repressive reaction to the presumption of the peasantry, was intended to maintain social order and keep general wage levels down, an incidental effect was that women, especially young women, bore the brunt of the backlash. Gender subordination was reinforced as a by-product of class struggle in this dramatic episode of English history as it was, too, in other times and places (Humphries, 1977).

Conclusions

Recent theorisations of variations in long-run economic performance draw attention to divergence within Europe – whereby the north-west, particularly England, moved ahead – and link this lead to the region's later age of marriage, and slower population growth. This interpretation has been embellished by linking the demographic pattern to life-cycle service, interpreting such service as a consequence of the Black Death, and positioning women at the centre of the account: a 'girl-powered Little Divergence' (GPLD). The model is characterised, like many which preceded it, by an inconsistent oscillation between an absolutely autonomous system of social reproduction, with biologically determinist overtones, and a completely derivative family system, which changes smoothly in response to economic opportunities. It is the latter which is emphasised in the GPLD which assumes that women who worked as annual servants enjoyed higher wages following the Black Death and that this was the cause of their delayed marriage.

A newly available series of women's wages observed in both annual and casual employment and over the very long run enables this assumption to be tested. The results are negative, for female servants' wages remained stagnant over the post-plague period providing no support for the GPLD hypothesis. If the Black Death, and women's response to it, did create the west via the GPLD it is not evident in wage patterns. Instead, the latter are interpreted as reflecting a contestation over women's roles as the relatively autonomous system of social reproduction responded to the chronic post-plague labour shortage. While workers struggled to improve their position, their responses were patterned by the conventional norms that structured family lives. While employers sought to repress assertive peasants, their clampdown reflected patriarchal ideas of dominance and subordination and was more easily imposed on younger unmarried women.

The post-plague interface between the organisation of social reproduction and the economy was not redrawn only by the needs of the economy; nor did it

indicate only the continuities of patriarchy. It also reflected how people sought to seize opportunities, secure advancement, defend privilege, control subordinates and throw off oppressors – all while freighted with inherited values and constrained by pre-existing institutions. Conceptualising social reproduction as relatively autonomous requires attention to agency, class, state and history. Such a frame explains why the ‘Golden Age’ glittered far less brightly for women. As casual workers, they were all too often employed alongside and under the direction of husbands or fathers, their productivity and earnings subsumed in the men’s remuneration. As annual servants, they struggled to evade legislation which required they work at customary wages on restrictive contracts. In the long and drawn-out struggle between landlords and workers which followed the Black Death, both sides projected patriarchal ideals of dominance and subordination and exhibited a fear of female autonomy. Not surprisingly then, despite the chimera of new opportunities and booming wages, outcomes for women were often but ‘new designs embroidered on a cloth of oppression and deprivation’.

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