

THE BUBONIC PLAGUE OF 1349, THE WAGE-TO-RENT RATIO, AND THE ENGLISH PEASANT FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

The bubonic plague that swept England in 1349 provides an example of how changes in economic conditions can change norms of social behavior. The death of almost 50 percent of the population altered the returns to labor and land. As the demand for land and the supply of labor declined, rents fell and wages rose. This increased wage-to-rent ratio shifted the structure of the economy from household production to market production. In turn, these changes affected migration, family and community ties, women's labor force participation, family size, inheritance customs, the status of landowning widows, and care for the elderly.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in the social behavior of the English peasant family after the bubonic plague swept England in 1349 are often attributed to a gradual shift in intrinsic values (i.e., a change in tastes),¹ but changes in relative prices may better explain post-plague changes in norms of social behavior.² The death of almost 50 percent of the population³ deeply altered the returns to both labor (wages) and land (rents). As the demand for land and the supply of labor declined, rents fell and wages rose. This increased wage-to-rent ratio shifted the structure of the economy from household production to market production. In turn, these economic changes affected migration, family and community ties, women's labor force participation, family size, inheritance customs, the status of landowning widows, and care for the elderly. Social upheaval notwithstanding, many English peasants retained their intrinsic values and even resisted the consequences of economic change. As the population recovered and the wage-to-rent ratio reverted to its pre-plague level, many older norms of social behavior reemerged.

THE BUBONIC PLAGUE AND THE WAGE-TO-RENT RATIO

Before the plague reduced an abundant population, competition for scarce land kept rents high and wages low. Most of the population were employed in nonwage farming, and nonmarket household production predominated.⁴ After

THE BUBONIC PLAGUE OF 1349

the first wave of the plague in 1349, labor was scarce, and wages rose quickly and sharply.⁵ “*Real* salaries [had] never been as high as they were then.”⁶ The magnitude of wage increases by 1388 is exemplified in the plaint of canons in nearby Normandy “that they could not find anyone to cultivate their land ‘who did not demand more than six servants would have been paid at the beginning of the century.’”⁷ Concomitantly, the demand for land had fallen with the decline in population, and rents were far lower.⁸ This change in the wage-to-rent ratio “represents major economic shifts that changed the peasant’s options considerably.”⁹

Until 1349, peasants had commonly sought money wages as a supplement to their income; over the next 150 years, high wages made wage labor a far more attractive option than it had been. Although wages increased throughout England, regions with the greatest population losses experienced the largest wage increases and attracted workers from regions with fewer losses and hence smaller wage increases. Many peasants with “marginal holdings simply abandoned their land and sought the highest wages they could get by migrating.”¹⁰ The plague had effectively ushered in the shift toward a more mobile, wage-earning society.

The increased cost of labor had many other effects. Payments-in-kind were replaced by monetary payments. Annual wages could increase only at the expiration date on a contract, but the daily wages some laborers could now command increased throughout the year as the market level of wages rose. Household servants, too, sought and obtained hourly wages.¹¹ The new premium for labor also created an incentive for peasants to shift production from labor-intensive cereals and grains to land-intensive cattle and sheep herding, a change that led to increased production of hides, meat, and dairy products.¹²

MIGRATION, FAMILY TIES, AND COMMUNITY TIES

English peasant society became far more mobile after the plague of 1349. Historical records show that increased migration went hand in hand with less stable community membership and community ties. The high rates of migration can be verified through comparisons of surnames on land records. During the fifteenth century, for example, about 75 percent of the families in a sample of West Midland villages disappeared every forty to sixty years and were replaced by immigrants.¹³ The percentage of land transfers within families dropped sharply after the plague. On southeastern manors, intrafamily transfers of land fell from 56 percent in 1300 to 35 percent by the end of the fourteenth century to 13 percent after 1400.¹⁴

Manorial records show a decrease in now less valuable land transfers within families in favor of an increase in relatively more valuable intrafamily inheritances or outright gifts of cash, chattel, and dowries.¹⁵ Instead of adhering to tradition, parents had begun to pass on their most valuable assets before as well as after death. Although this change in inheritance customs did reduce the family-land bond, it does not appear to be a result of declining family solidarity.

Increased migration could be attributed to individuals valuing community and family less (i.e., to a change in intrinsic values) but is probably best explained by differences in the wage-to-rent ratio across regions. When vast amounts of land became readily available in depopulated regions, inheritance was no longer the easiest way to obtain land to till. The promise of higher wages, too, lured many peasants to migrate in search of wage-labor, further reducing stability in community membership.

The changes in the wage-to-rent ratio after the plague and the ensuing migration led to a declining reliance on the communality of medieval agrarian society. Before the plague, "country people had to work together amicably . . . They toiled side by side in the fields, and they walked together from field to village, from farm to hearth, morning, afternoon, and evening."¹⁶ In this environment of intense personal contact, deep bonds of personal trust developed, and pledging—one person guaranteeing for another an appearance in court or the payment of a fine—was common.¹⁷

Evidence of weakening in community ties can be found in the peasants' behavior and specifically in the decline in the number of peasants willing to pledge for one another: after the first outbreak of pandemic, pledging all but vanished.¹⁸ Whereas members of a reduced cohort may have been dispirited or simply forced to rely more on themselves, the decline in such cooperative practices as pledging is probably best explained by changes in the wage-to-rent ratio and the subsequent increase in migration. Since individual peasants were far less likely to have the same neighbors for extended periods of time, the benefits from social networks were much lower and their costs much higher; hence, pledging became less attractive.

Legal and market-based alternatives substituted for pledging and other cooperative practices. In the absence of individuals willing to pledge, new laws imposed severe penalties for not fulfilling obligations required by manorial courts. As peasants became more involved in market work and relocated to cities, they partially replaced old community trust-based solidarity with fee-paying guild membership.¹⁹

WOMEN'S LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

The higher wages and lower rents after the plague not only shifted the structure of the economy from household production to market production but also changed the gender composition of the wage labor force. Although families may engage in and benefit from some degree of specialization in labor and human capital along gender lines (e.g., women's bearing and rearing children), both men and women respond to the rates of return available in household as well as market production.²⁰ Thus higher market wages encouraged women to enter the wage labor force in greater numbers than before and led to changes in norms of social behavior.

Before the plague, abundant labor kept wages so low that the benefits of market production were insufficient to draw many women out of household production. Some women combined household and market production, selling, for example, any thread spun not needed for household use, but most women reared their children and helped tend the household's fields. A thirteenth-century treatise on estate management urged bailiffs to hire women when possible for they would work "for much less money than a man would take."²¹

Women were actively involved in harvesting and ale brewing, allocating their time between market and household production according to prevailing rates of return. Whereas men participated in market work throughout the year, women's participation was seasonal. During harvest times, a peak in the demand for labor enabled women to bargain for higher wages, leading to seasonally higher women's labor force participation rates.²²

The majority of ale brewers before and after the plague were women, for brewing needed "female skills" like cooking and using household tools. Because few men competed for these jobs, women commanded a high return on their labor. Notably, at Iver and on a few other manors, where male work was not particularly time consuming, men did compete for brewing jobs. Predictably, women's wages and labor force participation rates were lower at Iver.²³

After the plague when wages for "male jobs" were rising sharply throughout England, women joined the wage-earning labor force. As men abandoned ale brewing for other jobs at Iver, women's wages and the number of alewives there also rose.²⁴ Taking advantage of the scarcity of labor, women entered traditionally male-dominated jobs and received wages increasingly at par with those of men. In 1380, harvesters and binders of sheaves in Gloucestershire received four pence a day regardless of gender, and female thatchers in Avening were paid the same daily rate as male thatchers in Minchinhampton.²⁵ The sudden introduction of

many laws seeking to limit women's wages is also evidence of their growing labor force participation.

As wages rose and the number of women in the labor force grew, goods and services were increasingly provided through markets instead of households. Instead of producing their own commodities, more and more women purchased cloth, ale, and bread with earned wages. Demand for childcare, a market substitute for a mother's time at home, reflected the fewer hours women spent at home. Servant girls, for example, increasingly left their children with neighbors or with hired nurses. Before the plague, one in five households in Halesowen, a representative village, employed a servant as a substitute for the mother's labor either permanently or for short periods of time. By the end of the fourteenth century, 43 percent of households in the village employed servants.²⁶

FAMILY SIZE

Women's entering the labor force had an impact on family size. Before the plague, the average peasant family comprised five persons. The first wave of the plague and subsequent smaller epidemics were responsible for the initial decline to fewer than four persons per household. Despite a vast increase in per capita income during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, average family size lingered below four for several generations.²⁷

During most of the Middle Ages, the more prosperous the family the more children survived. Dietary improvements would have increased fertility and reduced infant mortality, so natural barriers do not explain why average family size remained small for several generations after the plague. Nor can small family size be attributed to men's or women's desire to postpone marriage since the average age at marriage had dropped dramatically.²⁸

Since neither natural barriers nor a desire to postpone marriage explains family size, small families are probably best explained by changes in the wage-to-rent ratio. Higher wages for women increased the opportunity cost of staying home to rear children, and the demand for children fell. Peasant women had access to methods of preventing and aborting pregnancies. The first legal writings linking abortion with manslaughter appeared during this period, and contemporary medical texts explicitly cite herbal potions for inducing abortion. Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, the Church countered with guidelines forbidding, for example, "unnatural sex with one's wife," that is, sex not intended for procreation.²⁹

INHERITANCE CUSTOMS AND FAMILY TIES

Changes in the wage-to-rent ratio also affected inheritance customs and family ties among English peasants.³⁰ Before the plague, land was at a premium and wages were low. Young people had limited opportunities for acquiring land or seeking wage-earning jobs, and partible inheritance (division of family holdings among progeny) was typical. As land was reapportioned among succeeding progeny, plots were often too small to support families. Siblings with neighboring plots would frequently farm the land together, or younger siblings would vest control of their plots in the eldest sibling, who would manage their combined holdings and provide payments to the others.³¹

After the plague, as land became less valuable and opportunities for wage earning improved, impartible inheritance (passing land undivided to one heir) became the norm.³² The sale of plots vacated by families as the population fell, along with the rise of impartible inheritance, allowed the average size of peasant landholdings to roughly double throughout England. In Kibworth Harcourt, for instance, the average size of landholdings was twelve acres before the plague and twenty-four acres afterward.³³

Despite the availability of cheap land and inheritances of cash and chattel, many younger sons never reached the prosperity of eldest sons that received the family land. Where impartible inheritance was practiced, families tended to produce one son that became a peasant proprietor while the rest became day laborers, a lower status in medieval society. Differences in prosperity and social standing

drove the sibling group apart; brothers did not play cards with each other in the inn, and the laborers did not sit with their peasant brothers at the Stammtish. Siblings tended to avoid each other and apart from a formal bow at the church door on Sunday morning seldom if ever exchanged words.³⁴

The change in inheritance customs weakened the cooperative effort that had been common among proprietor brothers under partible inheritance. Clearly, "different forms of property arrangements shape in an intimate fashion the total fabric of the family."³⁵

THE STATUS OF LANDOWNING WIDOWS

The changing economic conditions in mid-century also affected the status of landowning widows. When land had been at a premium, men with little property

and few prospects for earning wages had commonly married widows with large landholdings. Even if widows chose not to remarry, relying instead on relatives to cultivate their holdings, previously landless peasants gained access to land and widows were assured of care for themselves and any young children.³⁶

Manorial court rolls seldom included women's marital status when reporting transactions, so determining the precise percentage of women who remarried is impossible; available evidence clearly suggests that most widows remarried without delay.³⁷ To ensure the supply of labor and service owed to the lord, manorial courts often ordered women to remarry and men to marry widows. What is less clear is how much choice widows had in whether to remarry and whom to marry.³⁸

After the plague, the availability of land and the increase in wages made widows far less attractive as marriage partners. Knowing they would have difficulty finding someone to cultivate their holdings, widows sometimes refused to accept their husbands' land. These women often entered convents or hospitals or made a retirement contract.³⁹

By the late fourteenth century, manorial rules requiring landowning widows to remarry were rarely enforced, and widows had far more freedom to remain unmarried or to choose their husbands. Canon law also upheld their right not to remarry.⁴⁰ Like other social changes in the aftermath of the plague, these changes in manorial and church practices are probably best explained not by shifts in intrinsic values governing widows' rights but by changes in the wage-to-rent ratio.

CARE FOR THE ELDERLY

A higher wage-to-rent ratio led to the formalization of arrangements for the care of the elderly. Before the plague, most aging landowning peasants were cared for by their children in return for a share of the inheritance. These informal obligations were typically assumed without explicit contracts. Even when formal retirement or maintenance contracts explicitly linked care for an elderly person with inheritance, these obligations remained within the family.⁴¹

As the value of land fell and opportunities for wage earning jobs grew, children relied far less on implied inheritance from their parents and had less incentive to care for them. Whereas for earlier cohorts, "the involvement of the younger generation in the lives of the old derived as much from economic need as from familial expectations about the duty of children to honour both father and mother,"⁴² not until after the plague is there a strong connection between

THE BUBONIC PLAGUE OF 1349

old age and poverty. In the twelfth century, churchman Maurice Sully "identifies as the Lord's poor the widow, the orphan, the sick, the exile, and the destitute, but not the aged."⁴³ Nor did Pope Innocent III consider poverty an "ill" of old age. As land lost its value, however, poverty increasingly accompanied old age. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the number of elderly poor had reached new heights. Lawmakers and churchmen alike urged children to care for their aging parents and admonished those who shirked:

If their parents be aged and fallen into poverty, so that they are not able to live of themselves, nor to get their living by their own industry of labour, then ought the children, if they will truly honour their parents, to labour for them, to see unto their necessity, to provide necessaries for them . . . forasmuch as their parents cared for them and provided for them, when they were not able to care and provide for themselves.⁴⁴

Since children now had less incentive to care for the elderly, to avoid poverty in their old age, peasants increasingly turned from implicit arrangements for their care to explicit contracts. In detailed documents filed in manorial courts, children, close relatives, or even non-relatives pledged care for elderly persons in return for wages, housing, or a share of an inheritance. These explicit arrangements were increasingly filed by nonfamily contractors, for parents who feared their children might not execute the documents properly would be reluctant to enter into explicit legal contracts since enforcement would require taking their children to court.⁴⁵

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND REVERSION TO OLD NORMS OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Evidence of resistance to change and reversion to old norms of social behavior make it unlikely that changes in intrinsic values (i.e., changes in tastes) led to the social behavior observed after the plague. Many in English society who retained the older intrinsic values resisted the consequences of widespread economic change, and as the population recovered and the wage-to-rent ratio reverted to its pre-plague level, earlier norms of social behavior reemerged.

Some efforts to maintain the pre-plague economic status quo addressed the wage-to-rent ratio itself. Manorial lords and Parliament attempted to hold wages down to pre-plague levels or at least to slow wage increases. Parliament's Statute of Laborers of 1351 is perhaps the most infamous example⁴⁶ These measures

were doomed to failure, however, by the magnitude of the decline in the labor force. Historically, the peasantry had been slow to rebel, but efforts to reverse positive economic effects ultimately led to the English Peasant Revolt of 1381. As traditionally argued, the poorest in society led the revolt against inequitable taxes; a more recent interpretation suggests that peasant elites organized resistance to the government's holding down wages and the lords' insistence that peasants continue to pay feudal dues with labor even after labor dues had been commuted.⁴⁷

Other legislative measures sought either to bar women from the labor force or to keep their wages lower than men's. A 1388 statute ordered that women laborers be paid one shilling less a year than ploughmen.⁴⁸ An ordinance issued that same year by Richard II decreed that women dairy workers be paid six shillings a year, equivalent to men's wages in the lowest paid professions of ploughing and swine herding.⁴⁹ That Parliament and the king supported these attempts to keep women out of the wage labor force implies that while some norms of behavior and family institutions had changed, intrinsic values governing the role of women had not.

Resistance to change was evident not only in post-plague legislation but also in the behavior of individual peasants. Although women were more engaged in market work and were having fewer children, their preferences for childbearing did not necessarily change. Many were reluctant to leave their children in the care of others, but given the increased earnings now available to women, the opportunity cost of staying out of the wage market had become too great.⁵⁰

The post-plague decline in the number of landowning widows who remarried is unlikely to reflect a decreased desire among widows to have mates. Despite the low demand for widows as spouses, the number of widows bearing illegitimate children increased.⁵¹ The implication is that although landowning widows were unable to find men willing to marry them, these women were not necessarily interested in spending the rest of their days celibate.

As the population recovered and the wage-to-rent ratio reverted to its pre-plague level, many familiar norms of social behavior reemerged. High wages and the subsequent high opportunity cost of having children depressed fertility rates for several generations even in the presence of better access to food and lower ages at marriage. Toward the end of the fifteenth century, however, wages fell and the value of land rose. Lower wages implied a lower opportunity cost of having children, and family size increased.⁵² Landowning widows were again in high demand as marriage partners,⁵³ and young couples delayed marriage until

THE BUBONIC PLAGUE OF 1349

they inherited land or saved enough to buy a small plot; hence, the average age at marriage increased.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

In the decades following the pandemic of 1349, norms of social behavior in the English peasant family changed drastically: migration, family and community ties, women's labor force participation, family size, inheritance customs, the status of landowning widows, and care for the elderly were altered not by a gradual shift in intrinsic values but by changes in the relative prices of labor and land. Many in English peasant society had retained older intrinsic values, however, and resisted the consequences of economic change; as the population recovered and the wage-to-rent ratio reverted to its pre-plague level, these earlier norms of social behavior reemerged.

NOTES

1. John Hatcher, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death," *Past and Present* (August 1994): 3–35.
2. "Fundamental changes in relative prices over time will alter the behavioral pattern of people and their rationalization of what constitutes standards of behavior." Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 84.
3. Market House Books, comp., *Encyclopedia of World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 528.
4. Harry Landreth and David C. Colander, *History of Economic Thought*, 3d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 28–29.
5. Sidney Pollard and David W. Crossley, *The Wealth of Britain, 1085–1966* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 57.
6. Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, vol. 1 of *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 193.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 291.
9. Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 108.
10. *Ibid.*, 115.

11. Gies and Gies, *Marriage and the Family*, 232.
12. *Ibid.*, 232–33.
13. Christopher Dyer, “Changes in the Size of Peasant Holdings in Some West Midland Villages, 1400–1540,” in *Land, Kinship, and Life-Cycle*, ed. Richard M. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 281.
14. Zvi Razi, “The Erosion of the Family-Land Bond in the Late Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: A Methodological Note,” in *Land, Kinship, and Life-Cycle*, ed. Richard M. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 296.
15. Cicely Howell, “Peasant Inheritance Customs in the Midlands, 1280–1700,” in *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800*, ed. Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk, and E. P. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 150–55.
16. Joan Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, 1500–1640* (London: Cambridge University, 1967), 4:255.
17. Gies and Gies, *Marriage and the Family*, 165–66.
18. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, 119; and Gies and Gies, *Marriage and the Family*, 231.
19. R. H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 91.
20. My analysis of women’s participation in the labor force draws heavily on Gary Becker, “A Theory of the Allocation of Time,” *Economic Journal* (September 1965): 493–517.
21. Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 119.
22. *Ibid.*, 119–24.
23. *Ibid.*, 124–26.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Hilton, *English Peasantry*, 101–3.
26. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, 56.
27. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, 94–95.
28. Gies and Gies, *Marriage and the Family*, 233.
29. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, 100–101.
30. The common law did not protect peasants’ property and inheritance rights over land since the lords (and ultimately the king) owned the land, but manorial courts upheld their right to “will” the use of land they tilled to their descendants. Howell, “Peasant Inheritance,” 119.

THE BUBONIC PLAGUE OF 1349

31. *Ibid.*, 138–46.
32. Hanawalt, *Ties that Bound*, 69–70.
33. Gies and Gies, *Marriage and the Family*, 230.
34. David Sabean, “Aspects of Kinship Behaviour and Property in Rural Western Europe Before 1800,” in *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800*, ed. Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk, and E. P. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 99.
35. *Ibid.*, 111.
36. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, 224.
37. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, 146
38. Agatha, a widow on an English manor, “was proposed as wife to two peasants, but both refused her! One of them was even willing to pay a fine in order to exempt himself from the duty. The second was sentenced in court for refusing either to marry her or to pay the fine.” Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Methuen, 1983), 239.
39. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, 224.
40. Michael M. Sheehan, *Marriage, Family and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*, ed. James K. Farge (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 35–36.
41. Gies and Gies, *Marriage and the Family*, 171.
42. Elaine Clark, “The Quest for Security in Medieval England,” in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 193.
43. David Herlihy, “Age, Property, and Career in Medieval Society,” in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 144.
44. Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction, 1300–1840* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 109.
45. *Ibid.*, 105–16.
46. Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Life in a Medieval Village* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 197.
47. Colin Platt, *King Death: The Black Death and Its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 123.
48. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, 151.
49. Shahar, *Fourth Estate*, 242.
50. *Ibid.*, 233. Shahar recounts how a servant girl who left her baby with a nurse

moved the child from nurse to nurse as her own employment changed. Her efforts to keep the baby close-by reflect mothers' unchanging tastes.

51. Ibid., 238.

52. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, 94-95.

53. Ibid., 224.

54. Platt, *King Death*, 37-38.