Demographic History and English Culture

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The subject of this special issue of *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, the population history of England from the Black Death to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, is at once among the best researched and most neglected of subfields. While demography and its allied methods continue to produce novel and exciting research, their findings rarely penetrate other disciplines—and, of course, vice versa. This is a shame, because demographic history sheds a great deal of light on the medieval and early modern periods. Indeed, demographic questions get to the heart of what it means to think of these as historical periods in the first place. That is, demography provides exciting and, in some cases, novel ways of thinking about the very old problems of continuity and change in history and culture.

Even a broad sketch of the demography of England from the late Middle Ages to early modernity will bring some of the possibilities of this approach into focus. Toward the beginning of the fourteenth century, the population of England reached a high point of around 4.75 million, before plummeting with the Black Death in 1348–49 and successive waves of plague to around 2 million by 1400.[1] Numbers stagnated throughout the fifteenth century, with growth only resuming in the early decades of the sixteenth century. After a little over a century of expansion, by 1650 the population reached roughly the same level as in the early thirteenth century, at 5.3 million.[2] A period of comparative stasis, with high rates of mortality and low rates of marriage, then prevailed until the early eighteenth century. Seen from this perspective, the late medieval and early modern periods look like the upward curve of a population cycle, gradually regaining the numbers that were lost with the Black Death. But if so, it was England's last population cycle, for the demography of England, like that of the world, was on the cusp of a profound transformation. By 1750, the Industrial Revolution and

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the demographic transition were under way. As capitalism remade forms of labor and consumption globally, new patterns of life emerged.

In its changing forms of labor and family life, late medieval and early modern demography points forward to this transformation. But it also directs our attention backward toward older patterns of life that vanished with the demographic transition. In this, as in so much else, it is an era of change, bridging modernity and the more remote past. Now more than ever, we need such bridges. We need, that is, to be able at once to respect the distinctiveness of the past and reflect on its significance for the present. But taking this stance is no easy task. For scholars in the humanities in particular, the conjoined forces of presentism and specialization have widened the gulf between the study of the preindustrial world and contemporary society. Individual periods can seem like islands of specialist knowledge, unconnected to any larger continent. In the absence of a deeper historical sense shared across subfields, scholars sometimes try to make the past meaningful by seeking reflections of present-day preoccupations in their area of research—a pursuit that can certainly illuminate, but, notoriously, is apt to distort. The other side of the coin is antiquarianism, or the investigation of the past for its own sake: an approach that certainly has its advantages but cannot convey the importance of the period to those who are not already committed to its study, or, arguably, to those that are.

Population history offers one way out of this impasse. It is not, to be sure, the only way. But it is a powerful method for understanding the medieval and early modern periods as culturally and historically distinctive epochs that are also integral links in a longer temporal sequence. By the same token, it also has the potential to span fields. Because the whole of the social order is implicated in the history of population change, it must necessarily be approached through a variety of methods and disciplines. That is not to suggest that all work in this field can or should be interdisciplinary, although several of the pieces in this special issue in fact are, including one collaborative essay between scholars based in different departments. More importantly, however, population history raises questions that can be asked across disciplines. It suggests how, as medievalists and early modernists, we might set about integrating the findings of many different disciplines into a broader picture of the period. In studies of the aftermath of plague, for example, epidemiology and economics come into dialogue, while in research into early modern nuptiality, literary culture and theology interact with the history of women and the family.

To consider such points of intersection is to revive some of the core

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ambitions of the pioneers of English historical demography. The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure was formed in 1964 by Anthony Wrigley and Peter Laslett, at a moment when historical sociology sought to synthesize the insights of history and the social sciences, including geography, anthropology, sociology, and economics, among others. Their goal was not only to describe past societies with greater accuracy and nuance, but also to gain a new understanding of how societies develop and change over time, from the deep past to the modern day. It was intended to rely on, and indeed unite, local historical studies, which brought small communities to life in astonishing detail, and macrohistorical analysis of the social, economic, and family structures of populations across the globe. It was, by that token, to weave disparate historical moments into a narrative that emphatically included the modern age. After all, many of the core questions addressed, such as the formation and dissolution of households, the economics of welfare, and the impact of urbanization, were front and center in political debates of the 1960s and 70s. The points of connection were obvious. As Laslett wrote in a preface to a Cambridge Group collection on the history of the family, "this is a new, or newly defined area of study and its importance to human behavior in the present as well as the past is manifest." The appearance of such a volume, he asserted, "needs neither apology nor defense."[3]

In one sense, the Cambridge Group's ambitions for empirically rigorous and theoretically innovative population histories were brilliantly fulfilled. Research conducted under their aegis helped to make England the best-studied demographic regime of the early modern world. This included the two volumes that drew together decades of work by historians and archivists on parish registers and other records from across England: Anthony Wrigley and Roger Schofield's *The Population History of England, 1541–1871* (1981) and the volume that followed, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (1997). Together, they gave premodern English population history a much firmer basis than it had ever had before. Inevitably, some of the methods and conclusions contained within these volumes met with skepticism. But the character of the debates they sparked were themselves a testimony to how far demographic research on early modern England had come. More broadly, the explosion of demographic and sociological research in the past decades has realized and exceeded anything that could have been envisioned in 1964. No one could have anticipated the full range of fields or the innovative set of techniques that would come to contribute to population research. To name just two, the ease with which big

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data can now be accessed and analyzed as a result of advances in computing has transformed all quantitative social research, demography emphatically included. And the field of genetics has shed new light on the history of populations, including migrations, disease, and the deep history of humanity.

At the same time, fields that have long studied the history of populations made and continue to make major contributions. Women's history, especially the history of women's work—a subject represented in this special issue—has drawn important connections between the conditions of the labor market and the formation of new households, among other subjects.[4] Local history, another field represented in this issue, has provided crucial evidence of how overarching trends played out on the ground by opening a window into the varied lives and choices of ordinary people. Economics has become a major player in early modern population history; it is fair to say that, in recent years, much of the most ambitious quantitative work on premodern population has come out of this field. The impact of economics on demography can, indeed, be seen in this special issue, in which many of the articles focus in one way or another on the relationship between population history, labor, and markets. While much remains uncertain, vastly more is now known about past populations, including the population of medieval and early modern England, than was the case a few decades ago.

But if the study of the preindustrial population has achieved some amazing advances on its own ground, its success has been decidedly limited outside it. Scholars who are not actively engaged in demographic research and are not working in one of the subfields that intersect directly with it are typically only dimly aware of its findings. If it is not neglected entirely, it is merely a background for changes that occur in other arenas and for other reasons. Nor does contemporary demography necessarily draw from other fields, configured around very different questions. As Steve Hindle writes in his article in this issue, "The increasingly muffled conversation between historical demographers and early modern historians has, depressingly, deteriorated still further into a dialogue of the deaf."[5] Across disciplines, neither the study of population nor the historically grounded social theory that was meant to underpin it is a unifying paradigm for research into medieval and early modern England.

This is certainly true within my own discipline, literary history. Although literary scholars are not, and cannot be expected to be, historical demographers, the study of literature has a clearer rationale than many fields for treating population dynamics as a major element of historical explanation. After all, the life cycle is perhaps the fundamental literary subject. By

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the end of the early modern period, the two principal dramatic genres, tragedy and comedy, were defined by the choice of death or marriage as a conclusion. The implications of reproduction, including generational change and the relationship between old and young, informed (and inform) virtually every work of literature.[6] As numerous literary scholars have recognized, urbanization, migration, and economic change form a major part of both the content and context of literary history.[7] In addition, literary study has always had a biographical dimension; literary scholars possess a vast repository of information about the lives and life courses of men and women who, if scarcely ordinary people, were distributed widely across regions and occupations. We have, that is to say, an amazing resource in our ability to connect authorial microhistories with demographic macrohistories.

In outline, these crucial subjects are, of course, by no means neglected in literary scholarship—far from it. New books are published every year dedicated to elucidating the relationship between the changing society and literary culture of medieval and early modern England. But, with some important exceptions, cutting-edge demographic research, especially in its more quantitative forms, has no place in such research.[8] As a result, while literary scholars know a great deal about the values and customs attached to the life cycle, much of it both relevant to historical demography and capable of illumination by it, there is little meaningful interchange between the two.

The same could be said of intellectual history and the history of religion. It is true that there have been some groundbreaking attempts to view population history and the life cycle as integral aspects of the development of ideas and beliefs over time, as, for example, through the concept of generational change. Most closely associated with Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific paradigm shifts, Alexandra Walsham has recently argued for its relevance to Reformation history.[9] Still, such an approach is by no means mainstream. In the vast majority of studies, demographic analysis remains merely context. This is all the more striking as the genesis and development of methods of recording and measuring populations is by now a well-established area of inquiry in literary and intellectual history. Scholarly works trace the careers of demographic pioneers like William Petty, the institution of parish registers and other life records, and the birth of modern national censuses, showing how the concept of "population thinking" shaped politics and culture alike.[10] Yet despite this preoccupation, comparatively little of the groundbreaking research on actual populations that has appeared in the last few decades has made its way into literary or intellectual history, much less played a decisive role in our analysis of its transformations over time.

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There are signs, however, that the time is ripe for new research into the preindustrial population across disciplines. We currently inhabit a moment that is uniquely preoccupied with demographic information. Our moral and political discourse takes much of its orientation from demographic categories. Voting patterns and personal beliefs are routinely broken down in the popular press in terms of geography, age, gender, race, income, and education. The COVID-19 pandemic taught even casual consumers of the news to understand death rates as linked to social categories and the life cycle. Opinion pieces on demographic topics, for instance connecting levels of education to life expectancy, appear regularly in newspapers such as *The New York Times*.[11] Politicians and social media personalities alike fret about aging citizens and faltering reproduction rates, while environmental campaigners worry about the still-expanding global population. As we come to see ourselves as bit players in an unfolding demographic drama, it is inevitable that we begin to consider the men and women of the past in similar terms.

In fact, something of the kind is clearly underway. It can be seen in the recent proliferation of abstract master narratives that view population cycles and reproductive strategies as key drivers of change, as exemplified by the (very different) arguments of Peter Turchin and Joseph Henrich.[12] It is equally evident in scholarship that brings a newly quantitative focus to the history and interplay of different demographic categories. To take only the most obvious example, race, gender, and geography have long been major analytic categories within cultural studies, but only recently have literary scholars and art historians, among others, begun to apply statistical methods to publications and prizes in order to track the history of cultural representation.[13] Medieval and early modern studies can and must contribute to the research conducted on these questions. Doing so will expand our field's base of knowledge and techniques of research. But, more importantly still, it will add a much-needed historical dimension to a discourse that is often confined to the modern age. A multidimensional and cross-disciplinary analysis of the era of population history that preceded, and indeed precipitated, the demographic transition is necessary if we are to grasp the developments that followed, whether in the spheres of culture, politics, or economics.

What might this look like in practice? Inevitably, research will take different forms in different disciplines, but demography can provide key points of intersection and guiding questions. Take, for example, a subject such as fertility within marriage. This is a challenging topic to study since it involves reconstructing some of the most intimate practices of couples. Over

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and above the daunting task of assembling data on births over time, moving from demographic patterns to the experiences and choices underlying them is formidably difficult, especially as such choices may never have been articulated, much less recorded. Yet the attempt is crucial for understanding what early modern lives looked like, including how wives and husbands related to one another, how the early modern household responded to changing economic pressures, and what assumptions and practices shaped childrearing. It is of profound significance for the history of everything from literature to economics to religion to politics.

What, if anything, did early modern men and women do to limit the number of children they had? Until recently, the best evidence has suggested that prior to the late nineteenth century, England was a regime of natural fertility in which family planning, in the modern sense of the word, was not practiced to a meaningful extent.[14] This did not, of course, mean that demographers have regarded the birth rate as a purely biological phenomenon. On the contrary, two cultural factors have played a major role in all accounts: late marriage shortened the window in which women could reproduce, while widespread and lengthy breastfeeding led to comparatively long intervals between births—both key determinants of the birth rate. As a result, most women in early modern England only had six or seven children, spaced at around thirty months.[15] Nevertheless, when demographers identified England as a regime of natural fertility, they asserted that the impact of custom and culture did not imply deliberate family planning, such as the choice to restrict further children once a couple had reached a certain number. Now the question is once again an open one, as new research has argued that for many couples spacing children was a conscious strategy adopted in response to economic pressures.[16] In addition, another strand of recent research raises the possibility that rates of infanticide, long thought to be a marginal practice in medieval and early modern Europe, were in fact very high.[17] Limiting family size may have been a choice, albeit one that was frequently made out of necessity. Although there is still little consensus, a new picture may be emerging that suggests that rates of reproduction were more dynamic, more responsive to short-term cultural and economic factors, and more intentional than previously supposed.

Teasing out the meaning of these patterns over time—and, by extension the forces that ultimately transformed them—necessarily involves multiple fields of inquiry. Important questions, such as the extent and impact of breastfeeding, have obvious biological, social, sexual, cultural, and religious dimensions. In her 1622 book advocating maternal breastfeeding, Elizabeth

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Clinton, Countess of Lincoln, instructs her readers, "Now who shall deny the own mothers suckling of their owne children: to bee their duty, since euery godly matrone hath walked in these steps before them: *Eue* the mother of al the liuing; *Sarah* the mother of al the faithfull; *Hannah* so gratiously heard of God; *Mary* blessed among women." It is, she adds, "the part of a true mother, of an honest mother, of a iust mother, of a syncere mother, of a mother worthy of loue."[18] Clinton's account, aligned with much religious instruction of the day, insists that breastfeeding is a religious calling and a moral duty.

Nevertheless, Clinton admits that she herself did not suckle her children, alluding to being "*ouerruled by anothers authority*" and "*deceiued by somes ill counsell*."[19] Though her treatise is addressed to elite women, the decision was obviously not theirs alone. Nor is the divergence between Clinton's recommendations and her practice particularly surprising. Despite religious exhortations, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, aristocratic women were likely to use wet nurses, while the majority did not. This, in turn, contributed to the higher birth rate of the elite; Clinton herself, for example, had eighteen children. Only with the Industrial Revolution did the pattern change, as married women employed outside the home could no longer afford to forgo work to breastfeed their own children; wet nurses, long a prerogative of the gentry, became more closely associated with the working classes. Changing economic incentives played a role in this aspect of fertility, as in others.

Again, this should not be viewed merely as a historical curiosity. Understanding these patterns is indispensable for interpreting history—including literary history. We cannot hope to make sense of changing representations of parents and children, men and women, marriage, and sex without understanding the imperatives that gave them shape—and the pressures that caused their shape to alter over the centuries. Nor does the influence only go in one direction: cultural and intellectual forces impact demography. To name just one example, there is some evidence that the French Revolution, with its dissemination of secular, Enlightenment thought, was directly responsible for the beginning of family planning in France.[20] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an ardent if absurdly unsuitable advocate of maternal breastfeeding, certainly wanted to be, and perhaps really was, an agent of demographic change. Considering the history of population brings these fascinating points of connection, and many others like them, into view.

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Working within and across the fields of plague demography, economic history, literary studies, the history of gender, and social history, each of the seven articles featured in this special issue demonstrates population history's potential to provide a framework for considering medieval and early modern England anew. The issue begins with an article by Philip Slavin that sheds fresh light on how different groups were affected by one of the most devastating mortality crises of medieval and early modern England: the second wave of the second plague pandemic, which swept England in 1361–62. Slavin argues that analyzing the impact of the second wave of the plague—long overshadowed by the Black Death of 1348–49—can help to solve some of the most enduring puzzles of English demography.

While Slavin's focus is on death, the following two essays consider marriage from a long historical perspective. Both are concerned with the European Marriage Pattern: the trend of unusually late female marriage prevailing in northwest Europe, including England, by early modernity. Ever since the European Marriage Pattern was identified by John Hajnal in an essay of 1965, it has been at the center of controversies about the relationship between the economy and population growth.[21] Some clarity is badly needed in these vexed debates, and that is precisely what Mark Bailey's illuminating new overview of the state of the field brings to the table. Subjecting many of the most prominent arguments about women's participation in the late medieval labor market and its impact on marriage to meticulous scrutiny, Bailey reveals the limitations of the existing evidence, while pointing to new pathways for research. Like Bailey, Sara Horrell, Jane Humphries, and Jacob Weisdorf fill a major gap in the scholarship on the European Marriage Pattern to date. The problem is this: claims made for the relationship between economic history and the European Marriage Pattern turn on the pressures and incentives faced by women, but historical wage series are based on the wages of male laborers. In their essay, Horrell, Humphries, and Weisdorf seek to close this evidentiary gap, presenting new information on women's and children's wages over time derived from many years of collaborative research.

The following three essays turn to the early modern period, reflecting on how population changes shaped culture and values. Ayesha Mukherjee's article considers how English writers' understanding of their own country and its people was transformed through encounters with Mughal India. Mukherjee's essay makes the crucial point that demographic history is necessarily the history of *populations*, not just population: England was, and knew itself to be, part of an increasingly interlinked globe. The next two essays,

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by Astrid Giugni and Scott Oldenburg, both focus on London, the central hub of the English population and economy. Giugni's article plunges into the fraught world of the urban parishes to investigate the impact of demographic and institutional change on conceptions of charity. Taking as case studies John Downham and William Gouge, two of London's most influential preachers, Giugni shows how moral reasoning evolved in response to demographic pressures. Oldenburg recounts the hair-raising tale of Richard Price, a master weaver who brutally murdered at least three of his apprentices before being hanged. Moving between parish registers, assize records, and broadside ballads, Oldenburg makes visible the array of documents and archives that allow scholars to develop a rich understanding of early modern lives and deaths.

The issue concludes with an article by Steve Hindle. Hindle draws on decades of research on the village of Chilvers Coton in Warwickshire, which also forms the basis of his new book, *The Social Topography of a Rural Community: Scenes of Labouring Life in Seventeenth-Century England*, to analyze forms of life and labor over a century, from 1680 to 1780.[22] In contrast to more optimistic accounts of industrialization, which connect changing patterns of labor and consumption to workers' rational pursuit of their own interests, he reveals the brutal constraints that shaped the lives and choices of ordinary people. Unlike the other essays in this issue, Hindle's reaches into the eighteenth century, describing the emerging industrial era with its new population dynamics. For this reason, among others, it is a fitting piece with which to end, illustrating the seamless transitions as well as the radical changes that characterize the movements of population across the centuries. From the Middle Ages to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, then, the articles in this special issue show how the fate of populations shaped the course of history.

Notes

1 Stephen Broadberry, Bruce M. S. Campbell, Alexander Klein, Mark Overton, and Bas van Leeuwen, *British Economic Growth, 1270–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); see also Andrew Hinde, *England's Population since the Domesday Survey* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 23–26.

2 E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 208–9.

3 Peter Laslett and Richard Wall, eds., *Household and Family in Past Time: Comparative*

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Studies in the Size and Structure of the Domestic Group over the Last Three Centuries in England, France, Serbia, Japan, and Colonial North America, with Further Materials from Western Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), ix.

4 Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood, "The Gender Division of Labour in Early Modern England," *Economic History Review* 73, no. 1 (2020): 3–32. See also Natasha Korda, *Labors Lost: Women's Work and the Early Modern English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

5 Steve Hindle, "Labor and Social Reproduction in an Industrializing Village, ca. 1680–1780," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 54, no. 3 (2024): 637–68, at 638.

6 Blaine Greteman, *The Poetics and Politics of Youth in Milton's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Julianne Werlin, "The Age of the Author: Print and Precocity in the English Renaissance," *Modern Language Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (2022): 303–34.

7 Among many others, see Nandini Das, João Vincente Melo, Haig Z. Smith, and Lauren Working, *Keywords of Identity, Race, and Human Mobility in Early Modern England* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Lena Cowen Orlin, ed., *Material London, ca. 1600* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Christopher Highly, *Blackfriars in Early Modern London: Theater, Church, and Neighborhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

8 Two such exceptions are by contributors to this special issue: Ayesha Mukherjee, *Penury into Plenty: Dearth and the Making of Knowledge in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Scott Oldenburg, *Alien Albion: Literature and Immigration in Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

9 Alexandra Walsham, "The Reformation of the Generations: Youth, Age, and Religious Change in England, c. 1500–1700," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 21 (2011): 93–121. See also Caroline Bowden, Emily Vine, and Tessa Whitehouse, eds., *Religion and Life Cycles in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

10 Ted McCormick, *William Petty and the Ambitions of Political Arithmetic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Theodore Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820–1900* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020); Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018).

11 See, for example, Anne Case and Angus Deaton, "Without a College Degree, Life in America Is Staggeringly Shorter," *New York Times*, Oct. 3, 2023, at www.nytimes.com/2023/10/03/opinion/life-expectancy-college-degree.html.

12 Peter Turchin, *Ages of Discord: A Structural Demographic Analysis of American History* (Chaplin, Conn.: Beresta Books, 2016); Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020).

13 See, for example, Richard Jean So, *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); and Diana Seave Greenwald, *Painting by Numbers: Data-Driven Histories of Nineteenth-Century Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021).

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14 E. A. Wrigley, R. S. Davies, J. E. Oeppen, and R. S. Schofield, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 457–61.
15 Wrigley et al., 508.
16 This is a highly complex issue, on which there is considerable disagreement. See, for example, Francesco Cinnirella, Marc Klemp, and Jacob Weisdorf, "Malthus in the Bedroom: Birth Spacing as Birth Control in Pre-Transition England," *Demography* 54, no. 2 (2017): 413–36; and the response by Gregory Clark and Neil Cummins, "Randomness in the Bedroom: There Is No Evidence for Fertility Control in Pre-Industrial England," *Demography* 56, no. 4 (2019): 1541–55.
17 Gregory Hanlon, *Death Control in the West, 1500–1800: Sex Ratios at Baptism in Italy, France, and England* (New York: Routledge, 2023).
18 Elizabeth Clinton, Countess of Lincoln, *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* (London, 1622), 5, 7.
19 Clinton, 16.
20 Faustine Perrin, "On the Origins of the Demographic Transition: Rethinking the European Marriage Pattern," *Cliometrica* 16, no. 3 (2022): 431–75.
21 For this foundational essay, see John Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective," in *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography*, ed. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), 101–43.
22 Steve Hindle, *The Social Topography of a Rural Community: Scenes of Labouring Life in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

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