

# HIDDEN WOMEN: REDISCOVERING THE SINGLEWOMEN OF EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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## Introduction

Historians of women in early modern England are becoming increasingly interested in women who lived their lives outside the state of marriage.<sup>1</sup> These scholars have begun to elucidate the lives and experiences of singlewomen, that is, adult females who had not yet married, as well as that smaller subset of women who died never married. Although the new focus on singlewomen is fruitful and long overdue, when it comes to explicating the numbers of such women in early modern England, not much work has been done. This is a significant lacuna since any study of singlewomen must confront the question of their significance (both in quantitative and qualitative terms) to early modern society.

This article is an attempt to calculate the proportion of singlewomen in the adult female population at a given moment in early modern England. It uses the Marriage Duty assessments to provide a snapshot of the number of adult singlewomen in the later seventeenth century. What this source reveals is that singlewomen comprised between a third and a half of the adult women in various English communities in the 1690s. But, as useful as the Marriage Duty listings are for exploring marital status, there are also several problems that must be addressed when using them. Taking Southampton as a case study, this article shows how the early modern biases of the assessors, as well as the modern conventions of historical demographers, serve to hide the adult singlewomen recorded in the Marriage Duty assessments. In fact, the proportion of singlewomen in England's adult female population was higher than it appears at first glance.

The idea that at least one third of adult women were single in seventeenth-century England may come as a surprise to many scholars. One reason, perhaps, is that when we think of numbers of single people in the pre-modern period we most likely think of the work of E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield.<sup>2</sup> Using back projection techniques to estimate mortality levels and age structure, and then combining these with marriage totals derived from parish registers, they estimated that for persons born between the years 1575 and

1700 fully 13 to 27 per cent had never married by their forties. They also posited that early modern rates of non-marriage were highest throughout the seventeenth century, at the end of which they peaked and began to fall.<sup>3</sup> Wrigley and Schofield's figures have not gone unchallenged. David Weir has argued that both under-registration and clandestine marriages may have made celibacy rates look higher than they actually were, particularly in the later seventeenth century. Weir has suggested that from 6 to 20 per cent of people born between 1566 and 1741 had not married by their forties.<sup>4</sup> Schofield's more recent work has also settled on a lower estimate of 4 to 19 per cent of people dying never married in early modern England.<sup>5</sup>

This article addresses a different question: instead of estimating how many women died never married, it provides a calculation of how many adult women were single at a given point in time. We must remember that demographers like Wrigley, Schofield, and Weir were not calculating numbers of singlewomen, rather they were estimating rates of marriage and non-marriage in order to chart fertility rates.<sup>6</sup> This means that historians of singlewomen should be wary of using their estimates as a basis for any arguments about the presence of singlewomen in the past. First of all, Wrigley and Schofield never calculated actual numbers of single people. There are few records that illustrate how many early modern people died never married (burial registers, for instance, rarely included a person's marital status). This meant that Wrigley and Schofield had to rely on demographic models and back projection to arrive at an estimation of the proportion of people who were still single in their forties. Second, and even more problematic for studying singlewomen, demographers did not break down their estimates by gender.<sup>7</sup> Wrigley and Schofield did not estimate marriage rates for both men and women; it was never their interest to do so. And third, these scholars were concerned with estimating proportions of people who died never married. This is not the same thing as calculating the single adult population, including people who might yet marry, as well as that smaller group of people who died never married.

### **Marriage Duty assessments in late-seventeenth century Southampton**

In order to calculate the proportion of adult women who were single at a given point in time, a source is needed that estimates the marital status of all adults. Such a source would provide a snapshot of all adult singlewomen at a particular point in the past. Fortunately, such a source exists for England in the early modern period. Called the Marriage Duty Tax, these assessments recorded individuals and provide some evidence of their marital status for communities throughout England in the later seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup> The Marriage Duty Tax arose because of the English government's need for money in the 1690s when war was declared on France. The government decided to levy a new type of tax on all births, marriages, and burials, as well as an annual duty on bachelors over the age of 25 and childless widowers. This legislation stayed in effect between 1695 and 1706. With every vital event subject to taxation, and parishes responsible for paying the burial tax for those

on poor relief, local assessors drew up purportedly complete lists of their inhabitants. Historical demographers consider these listings to be the closest thing to a complete census before the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, historians suggest that about 10 per cent of England's population most likely escaped registration.<sup>9</sup>

The Marriage Duty assessments have long been a mainstay of historical demographic research. Numerous scholars have used the listings to compute population totals, sex ratios, and household composition in various communities across late seventeenth-century England.<sup>10</sup> Documents related to the Marriage Duty are extant for at least 150 rural and urban communities, and more returns periodically come to light.<sup>11</sup> The port town of Southampton has one of the most complete series of Marriage Duty assessments, with extant returns for the years 1695–97. This means that many historians have used Southampton's assessments, but they have usually used the listings for only some of Southampton's eight (intramural and suburban) parishes, or have used assessments from more than one year at the same time.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, this article uses the assessments from all eight Southampton parishes for the single year of 1696, which means that the figures on the town's population structure presented here vary from those presented in earlier demographic studies. This article is also the first attempt to use Southampton's Marriage Duty assessments as a source for shedding light on the adult population's marital status.

The reason so many historical demographers have employed Southampton's listings is their ease of use and thoroughness. Each parish in the town appointed two assessors who compiled lists of all inhabitants by going from house to house. The men began to write on a new line each time they listed a new household. They recorded the name of the head of household first (usually a married male) and then the names of his wife, children, and any relatives residing in the household. This was followed by a list of any lodgers, servants, and apprentices. Along with the person's name was usually a description of their relationship to the household head. For instance, in St. Michael's parish a household entry looked like this:

Aaron Deveule, his wife Susanah, children: Mary, Sarah, Aaron, Eliz.,  
Anne, Frances, Susanah, maid servant Mary Vine.

While Southampton's Marriage Duty assessments have seen a fair bit of use, the history of the town in the early modern period has not been of as much interest to historians. This is largely because the port was at its lowest ebb in this period.<sup>13</sup> By the sixteenth century the Mediterranean trade that had made Southampton one of the most important ports in medieval England had waned, or had been taken over by London merchants. The town had no industry to speak of, and dwindling customs revenues meant that its economy floundered. The civil wars of the mid-seventeenth century continued to disrupt trade and the Plague of 1665 hit Southampton hard. Largely due to disease, the town's population fell from about 4,200 in 1596 to only 3,001 a century later. By the end of the seventeenth century the corporation was in

debt, there had been no significant building in Southampton for over a hundred years, and visitors such as Celia Fiennes called the town 'distressed'. But in the eighteenth century things began to look up. Gentry and nobility started to build country houses near the town, and a mineral spring began to attract elite visitors interested in drinking the waters to improve their health. Most importantly, Frederick Prince of Wales arrived in 1750 to bathe in the sea. Where royalty came, the fashionable followed, and for the remainder of the eighteenth century Southampton enjoyed a new reputation as a spa and resort town along with renewed economic prosperity.

### **Singlewomen in late-seventeenth century Southampton: preliminary estimates**

To produce statistics on adult singlewomen from Southampton's Marriage Duty assessments, Peter Laslett and Richard Wall's 'Suggested rules for interpreting English documents' were followed. According to these guidelines for working with population listings, all persons recorded as 'child', 'son', or 'daughter' should be counted as unmarried minors, and all women recorded as 'servant', 'lodger', or 'sister' should be considered singlewomen.<sup>14</sup> Following these rules, the Marriage Duty assessments provide the following data about the town's population in 1696. The inhabitants listed in Southampton's eight parishes in 1696 yield a population total of 3,001 persons.<sup>15</sup> Over half or 1,645 of the town's inhabitants were female. Like many English towns in the seventeenth century, Southampton was female-dominated, with an overall sex ratio of 81.5 males to every 100 females.<sup>16</sup> An initial count reveals that Southampton's female population consisted of 931 single females, 473 wives, and 156 widows. The most that could be determined about another 85 females was that they were unmarried adults (either singlewomen or widows). While Southampton's assessors always recorded a married woman as a 'wife', sometimes they did not indicate if an unmarried adult woman was a widow or a spinster, and so to be precise I have assigned these 85 women to a separate category called 'unmarried women'.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, as Table 1 shows, the Marriage Duty data reveal that over half, or 56.6 per cent, of the females in Southampton were single (both children and adults). A further 28.7 per cent were married, 9.5 per cent were widowed, and 5.2 per cent were unmarried adult women (either single or widowed). High proportions of singleness were not restricted to women either: 59.7 per cent of Southampton's males were single (both children and adults), 35.2 per cent were married, and 4.2 per cent were widowed.<sup>18</sup>

The next step was to determine the proportion of singlewomen in the adult female population, which meant that single female children had to be excluded. Unfortunately, Southampton's Marriage Duty assessors did not include the ages of the inhabitants they recorded. This is true of most of the Marriage Duty assessments since age was not a required category, making it impossible to know for sure who was a minor and who was an adult. So Laslett and Wall's guidelines for counting minors were again followed, as was

**Table 1 Marital status of females and males in Southampton, 1696**

Marital status	Females		Males	
	No.	%	No.	%
Single (minors)	685	41.6	549	41.0
Single (adults)	246	15.0	251	18.7
Married	473	28.7	472	35.2
Widowed	156	9.5	56	4.2
Unmarried (either single or widowed)	85	5.2	12	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,645</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,340</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Note:** Sixteen persons are not included in the above figures because their gender was uncertain.

**Sources:** Southampton Record Office, SC 14/2/66a-b, 67a-b, 68a-b, 69, 70a-b, 71, 72, 73a-c, 74a-c.

their suggestion of counting any women recorded as 'servant', 'lodger' and 'sister' as single adults. The results, shown in Table 1, reveal that 41.6 per cent of females and 41.0 per cent of males in Southampton were minors. Once female children are excluded from the female population it is possible to identify the adult women in Southampton. As Table 2 shows, in 1696 25.6 per cent of the adult females in Southampton were single, 16.3 per cent were widowed, and a further 8.9 per cent were unmarried (either single or widowed).

The Marriage Duty assessments for Southampton reveal that less than half of all adult women, or 49.2 per cent, were married. While early modern historians have assumed that the married state was normal for adults, this source shows that the majority of women in Southampton were actually unmarried in the late-seventeenth century. Perhaps equally surprising, the majority of unmarried adult women were single, not widowed: for every two widows living in seventeenth-century Southampton, there were three adult singlewomen.

### Hidden singlewomen

As impressive as the numbers of singlewomen derived from Southampton's Marriage Duty listings are, these are only preliminary numbers. Due to two methodological problems, the assessments actually hide (and thus lead us to underestimate) the proportion of adult singlewomen. The first problem is that the biases of the early modern period serve to hide adult singlewomen in the contemporary sources. To understand why we need to look at the intentions

**Table 2 Preliminary calculations of marital status of adult women in Southampton, 1696**

Marital Status	%
Single	25.6
Married	49.2
Widowed	16.3
Unmarried (single or widowed)	8.9
Total	100.0

**Sources:** Southampton Record Office, SC 14/2/66a-68b, 70a-74c.

and assumptions of the creators of the tax listing. The Marriage Duty assessments were not documents designed to detect singlewomen; in fact, they often masked their existence. It is important to remember that the Marriage Duty was a tax, and as such the assessments listed what early modern people considered to be households (and heads of households) because they were the basic units of taxation in early modern England. The Marriage Duty was so called because it was a tax on births, marriages, and burials, and since such familial events were their focus the assessors recorded families and the male heads of household responsible for paying these taxes. Singlewomen only mattered in the eyes of the tax collectors if they got married, gave birth or died, for by doing so they were liable to a tax.<sup>19</sup>

Second, the Marriage Duty sometimes did specifically identify single adults, but these single adults were men, not women. Men's marital status is more evident in this source because a tax was levied on bachelors over the age of 25 as well as on childless widowers. Contemporaries assumed these men could afford to pay a tax because they had no family for which to provide. Singlewomen over the age of 25 and widowed women did not pay a comparable tax, perhaps because contemporaries presumed that women could not afford to do so.<sup>20</sup> While unmarried women benefited financially from this lack of taxation, historians of women do not. Since unmarried women were not taxed like their male counterparts, the marital status of these women was not always explicitly recorded. This means that the Marriage Duty is a less helpful source for historians interested in singlewomen; since their marital status was of less interest to the assessors, it was not as well recorded.

Lastly, sources such as the Marriage Duty Tax cannot be read outside the context in which they were created. Early modern England was a Protestant society that encouraged universal marriage. Government officials (tax assessors included) reflected this societal ideal. Unmarried adult males were taxed, perhaps to coerce them into marriage. Bachelors and widowers seem to have been taxed implicitly to encourage marriage, since married men were not taxed comparably.<sup>21</sup> Unmarried adult women were not taxed, it seems, because contemporaries assumed women would not remain unmarried by

**Table 3 Household position of single females in Southampton, 1696**

Relationship to household head	No.
Daughter	681
Servant	181
Boarder, lodger, or stranger	25
Sister	20
None-- marital status derived from other sources	17
Kinswoman	3
Granddaughter	2
Niece	1
Nurse child	1

**Note:** This does not include the 85 unmarried adult females who were either single or widowed. These 85 women had no recorded household position or were heads of household with no recorded marital status.

**Sources:** Southampton Record Office, SC 14/2/66a-68b, 70a-74c.

choice. All women who had not yet married were assumed to be wives in waiting. They were denied the status of independent adults and assessors were not likely to record mature singlewomen as such. Instead these women were more likely to be presented under the rubrics of 'daughter', 'servant', 'sister' or 'lodger'—categories which positioned the adult singlewoman as a household dependent, or wife in waiting, rather than as an autonomous individual. For example, out of the 931 single females identified in Southampton's Marriage Duty assessments, 862 were listed as either daughters or servants (see Table 3). This means that 92.5 per cent of single females (both minors and adults) *appear* to have been young females living with parents or masters and awaiting some future marriage. But such designations can be misleading. Were all these so-called 'daughters' actually children or youths?

The answer depends on how we define 'daughter'. The second methodological problem encountered is not the source itself but the conventions established by modern-day demographers for using the source. When we follow the guidelines for counting children and adults created by historical demographers like Peter Laslett and Richard Wall, we miss counting a number of adult singlewomen. Modern guidelines turn out to be as much of an obstacle to determining numbers of singlewomen in the past as the early modern sources.<sup>22</sup> Laslett and Wall, as we have seen, suggested that any females recorded as 'daughter' in population listings such as the Marriage Duty should be counted as minors. But some scholars, including Kevin Schürer, have acknowledged that persons recorded as 'son' and 'daughter'

might have been adults. Although the children of the household head, these individuals were not necessarily children in the sense of being underage or in their minority.<sup>23</sup>

A number of adult singlewomen are likely to be hidden behind the words 'daughter' or 'child'. This is especially true because historians of the family in early modern England have found that it was common for adult daughters to remain at home with their parents. For instance, Richard Wall found that half of all singlewomen between the ages of 15 and 44 who lived in the English communities of Lichfield and Stoke-on-Trent, and almost half (43.9 per cent) of those who resided in Corfe Castle, were living in the parental home.<sup>24</sup> This means that women designated as 'daughter' in listings such as the Marriage Duty could have been adult singlewomen rather than female children.

If ages are not recorded, the only way to determine if recorded children were in fact minors is to check for them in other sources that might shed some light on their age. Cross-checking of evidence derived from population listings with other available sources is, of course, a laborious process, and one that depends upon the serendipity of record survival: but if we want to produce more accurate statistics about the past, the work must be done. Due to Southampton's relatively good series of parish and municipal records, it proved possible to cross-check the names of a limited number of the single females listed in the 1696 assessments. The sources consulted include parish registers (which record baptisms, and thus can help reveal a person's age), wills, court records, and other tax listings extant from Southampton. The results of this cross-checking were revealing.

It was possible quickly to identify the approximate age of 40 women who were recorded as 'daughter' in Southampton's Marriage Duty assessments. All of these were over the age of 18 (a conservative threshold of female adulthood in the early modern era), and some women were considerably older.<sup>25</sup> For instance, Elizabeth Downer, who lived with her father in St Michael's parish, was described in the Marriage Duty as his 'daughter'. While we might assume from this that Downer was a young girl, parish registers revealed that she had been born in 1655, which made her 41 years old when she was listed in the 1696 assessment. Similarly, Jane Helliard was 39 years of age when the Holy Rood parish assessors recorded her as a 'daughter'.

While Elizabeth Downer and Jane Helliard are extreme examples, they were by no means rare. For instance, three women in the Marriage Duty listings had sued debtors in the town's Common Court in the mid-1680s, an action only a singlewoman over the age of 18 could take. This means that by 1696 these three women were at least in their late twenties or early thirties when the tax assessors recorded them as 'daughter'. Three other women in the 1696 Marriage Duty had appeared in the 1692 Poll Tax. These women were recorded as servants in that year, so if they had entered service in 1692 in their mid-teens, as was common, a conservative estimate would place them around the age of 20 in 1696. But these women also could have been in service for a

few years by 1692 which would mean that they were well into their twenties by 1696. The largest number of adult children were found in Holy Rood parish: 15 recorded 'daughters' were actually adult singlewomen. Among them was Mary Vernon, a woman recorded as a servant in a tax listing as far back as 1678. This made her at least 34 years old in 1696, if not older: Vernon was no child, she was almost middle-aged.

The problem of hidden singlewomen is not limited to Southampton and its Marriage Duty assessments. Population listings from the Middlesex community of Harefield yield similar examples from 1699.<sup>26</sup> In Harefield, as in Southampton, individuals recorded as children were not always minors. For example, the household of John Hanyan Esquire and his wife Susan included a 30-year old 'son', Henry, and a 22-year old 'daughter', Elizabeth. Frances Binnet, widow, was listed with her 'daughter' Frances, aged 27.<sup>27</sup>

Listings based on the 1695 Marriage Duty assessments for the Staffordshire town of Lichfield also included the ages of the inhabitants. These listings can provide a sense of just how many persons recorded as 'child' may have in fact been above the age of majority. Lichfield was almost the same size as Southampton in the late-seventeenth century. Of its 2,861 inhabitants, almost one third, or 933, were single females (compared to 804 single males). Over half, or 511, of the 933 single females were under the age of 15, and were thus children (see Table 4). Added to this were 170 singlewomen between the ages of 15 and 20, and thus in the midst of young adulthood. A further 125 were between the ages of 20 and 25, and 72 more were between the ages of 25 and 30. These women, while not minors, were precisely the type likely to have been recorded as children by the Marriage Duty assessors in other communities, especially if they were still living in the parental home or were at home between jobs in service. Numbers of singlewomen in Lichfield still remained relatively high among thirty-somethings: there were 25 singlewomen between the ages of 30 and 35, and another 22 between the ages of 35 and 40. A further eight singlewomen over the age of 40 lived in the town in 1695. The Lichfield evidence thus reveals that singlewomen were a common demographic group until women reached their forties. This is significant since few people in late seventeenth-century Lichfield lived beyond the age of 65 or 70.<sup>28</sup> Calculating only numbers of single women over the age of 40 misses the majority of single females in early modern communities. This is why calculations of all adult women who had *not yet* married are more useful for determining the presence of singlewomen in the early modern era than are estimates of never-married women in their mid-forties.

### **Singlewomen in late-seventeenth century Southampton: revised estimates**

The discovery that a significant number of females recorded as 'daughter' in the Southampton Marriage Duty assessments were not minors but adult singlewomen has a significant effect on the calculations. As Table 5 shows, subtracting the 40 adult 'daughters' from the category of child and adding them to the adult singlewomen category increases the proportion of

**Table 4** Age of all single females in Lichfield, 1695

Age groups (inclusive)	No.
1-15	511
15-20	170
20-25	125
25-30	72
30-35	25
35-40	22
40-45	3
45-50	1
50-55	2
55-60	0
60+	2
Total	933

**Source:** D.V. Glass, 'Gregory King's estimate of the population of England and Wales', *Population Studies*, 3 (1950), 364.

singlewomen in Southampton's adult female population from 25.6 to 28.6 per cent, while the proportion of married women drops from 49.2 to 47.3 per cent, and widowed women fall from 16.3 to 15.6 per cent. Unmarried women (either singlewomen or widows) fall slightly to 8.5 per cent. Moreover, the 40 adult daughters discovered by cross-checking other sources from Southampton are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg: more exhaustive cross-checking would have certainly turned up more similar cases, and further raised the proportion of singlewomen in the adult female population.

For the final count of adult singlewomen in early modern Southampton, the 8.5 per cent of adult women whose marital status could only be determined as unmarried (whether single or widowed) were assigned into the respective categories of singlewomen and widows. As singlewomen outnumbered widows in the 91.5 per cent of the population whose marital status could be identified, two-thirds of the unspecified unmarried women were added to the singlewomen category and one-third to the widowed category. Adding two-thirds of the unmarried women to the second count of adult singlewomen produced a final calculation of 34.2 per cent (see Table 5). Before the corrected second count it appeared that adult singlewomen comprised a little over a quarter of Southampton's adult female population in 1696, but the final figures suggest that singlewomen were even more numerous, comprising just over a third of the adult women in Southampton.

**Table 5 Final calculations for marital status of adult women in Southampton, 1696**

Marital status	First count (raw numbers based on Marriage Duty)	Second count (includes 40 adult singlewomen recorded as 'children')	Final count (two thirds of unmarried women added to singlewomen category and one third added to widow category)
	%	%	%
Singlewomen	25.6	28.6	34.2
Widows	16.3	15.6	18.5
Wives	49.2	47.3	47.3
Unmarried (single or widowed)	8.5	18.5	0.0

**Source:** Southampton Record Office, SC 14/2/66a-68b, 70a-74c.

### Southampton in context

If over a third of the adult women inhabiting Southampton in 1696 were single, was this unique, or did other English communities also have significant proportions of single female inhabitants? It is possible to compare Southampton with other communities for which Marriage Duty assessments are extant. Such comparisons reveal that the proportion of adult singlewomen in Southampton was in keeping with, but actually lower than, those in other English communities. To produce these comparisons, the work of other historians on the Marriage Duty assessments (none of whom calculated numbers of adult singlewomen) has been used to compile statistics on the marital status of the populations concerned. Hence from Philip Styles' work on the Marriage Duty assessments for the village of Fenny Compton, Warwickshire, it was calculated that as many as 35.6 per cent of the adult women in this community were single in 1698, which shows that significant numbers of singlewomen were not merely a feature of towns.<sup>29</sup> Smaller towns were also home to more singlewomen than was Southampton: Gregory King's figures for the Staffordshire town of Lichfield reveal that as many as 49.9 per cent of adult females in the town were single.<sup>30</sup> But perhaps nowhere were singlewomen more prominent than in London where, from the statistics compiled by D.V. Glass, it was calculated that singlewomen made up over half, or an astounding 54.5 per cent, of the adult female population in the late seventeenth-century.<sup>31</sup> This is no doubt due to the uniquely large number of servants and apprentices who migrated to the metropolis to find work. What these comparisons reveal is that the proportion of singlewomen in Southampton's adult female population, at 34.2 per cent, was actually on the low side; and this is true without any cross-checking for adult 'daughters' having been undertaken for Fenny

**Table 6 Marital status of adult women in early modern England**

Marital status	Southampton, Hants. (pop. 3,001)	London	Fenny Compton, Warwicks. (pop. 415)	Lichfield, Staffs. (pop. 2,861)	100 English Communities
	%	%	%	%	%
Single	34.2	54.5	32.6	49.9	30.2
Married	47.3	37.7	55.0	35.4	54.9
Widowed	18.5	7.9	12.4	14.7	14.9
Total	100.0	100.1	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Notes:** Some of these estimates did not distinguish between single female minors and single female adults. I have calculated the percentages of adult singlewomen myself by subtracting the proportions of children in these urban populations (23 per cent in London, 35 per cent in Fenny Compton, and 40 per cent in the 100 English communities) from the total number of single females to derive the marital status of adult women only.

**Sources:** Southampton Record Office, SC 14/2/66a-68b, 70a-74c; D.V. Glass, 'Notes on the demography of London at the end of the seventeenth century', *Daedalus*, 97 (1968), 583-84, 586; P. Styles, 'A census of a Warwickshire village in 1698', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 3 (1951-2), 39; D.V. Glass, 'Gregory King's estimate of the population of England and Wales', *Population Studies*, 3 (1950), 364; P. Laslett, 'Mean household size in England since the sixteenth century', in P. Laslett and R. Wall, eds, *Household and family in past time* (Cambridge, 1972), 145.

Compton, Lichfield, or London. It is possible that the depressed state of Southampton's economy, outlined above, rendered it less attractive than many other towns to single, female migrants.

The percentages of adult singlewomen in various communities in early modern England are laid out for comparative purposes in Table 6. In addition to the four individual communities for which statistics have been compiled, this table includes the percentage of adult singlewomen derived from Peter Laslett's population figures for a sample of 100 communities in early modern England. Laslett's work was based on various types of local population listings, including the Marriage Duty assessments. After subtracting 40 per cent from his figures for single females (to separate out minors in the population), it was calculated that on average 30.2 per cent of adult women in early modern England were single.<sup>32</sup> This number is slightly lower than that found in towns like Lichfield and Southampton, but is still surprisingly high considering that Laslett's 100 communities included rural as well as urban centres. And, once again, no cross-checking has been done for 'hidden' adult daughters.

## Conclusion

The data considered here suggest that singlewomen in late-seventeenth century England comprised at least a third of all adult women. Moreover, in smaller towns such as Lichfield, as well as in the much larger metropolis, as much as half of the adult female population was single. Factoring in the proportions of widows, it is apparent that only about a half of all adult women in early modern England were married at any given moment. This is a sobering thought, since most of the research to date on women in the early modern period has focused on married women. The statistics presented in this article, therefore, should provide some added impetus to the growing body of work on singlewomen. These women comprised a large proportion of the adult female population, and as such, need to be integrated into research on women in early modern England.

The high numbers of single and widowed adult women living in early modern England mean that historians of this period must be more careful about assuming that marriage was the norm for adults, or that it dominated all of a person's mature years. Moreover, the guidelines historical demographers have established for using population listings have unintentionally, but also unreflectively, replicated the marriage-centred focus of the early modern assessors. By focusing on the married male head of household, and by referring to people only in relationship to the household head, historians have obscured the adult singlewomen who lived in these households, just as early modern assessors once did. Both the assessments and the rules we have created to use them reflect a marriage-centred perspective: we need carefully to reconsider these sources and the ways in which we read them in order to provide a more accurate picture. Early modern England was a complex society and if we acknowledge that all documents from the era are constructed texts that reflect the cultural assumptions of the time, even sources created to hide this complexity can be used to help reveal it.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the following organizations for the financial support to conduct the research for this article: the Local Population Studies Society, Duke University, the North American Conference on British Studies, and the Huntington Library in conjunction with the British Academy. She would also like to thank the *Local Population Studies* Editorial Board, and Terry Bouton, for their comments and helpful suggestions.

## NOTES

1. P. Sharpe, 'Literally spinsters: a new interpretation of local economy and demography in Colyton in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', *Economic History Review*, 44 (1991), 46-65; C. Peters, 'Single women in early modern England: attitudes and expectations', *Continuity and Change*, 12 (1997), 325-45; B. Hill, *Women alone: spinsters in England 1660-1850*, (New Haven, 2001). And see my own work in J.M. Bennett and A.M. Froide, eds, *Singlewomen in the European past*, (Philadelphia, 1999) and A.M. Froide, 'Singlewomen, work, and community in

- Southampton, 1550-1750', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, 1996).
2. Historians of singlewomen in early modern England have relied on the work of these two scholars when addressing how many singlewomen there were in early modern England. For two recent examples, see Hill, *Women alone*, 10–11; and S. Mendelson and P. Crawford, *Women in early modern England*, (Oxford, 1998), 166–7.
  3. J. Hajnal, 'European marriage patterns in perspective', in D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley, eds, *Population in history: essays in historical demography*, (London, 1965), 101–43; E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541–1871: a reconstruction*, (London, 1981), 255–65.
  4. D.R. Weir, 'Rather never than late: celibacy and age at marriage in English cohort fertility', *Journal of Family History*, 9 (1984), 340–54, esp. 346.
  5. R.S. Schofield, 'English marriage patterns revisited', *Journal of Family History*, 10 (1985), 2–20.
  6. Demographers are interested in fertility because they believe it is the motor of population change. According to their models, if a woman marries relatively late in adulthood, or not at all, she produces fewer children, and thus the population grows more slowly. Demographic interest in potential fecundity has led these scholars to label as 'celibates' or 'spinsters' women who reach their forties (and so presumably the end of their childbearing days) without marrying. Feminist critics of demography have pointed out that women only enter into the demographic picture as agents of fertility, and that the only women who seem to 'matter' are those between the ages of 15 and 45. For a feminist critique of historical demography, see B. Hill, 'The marriage age of women and the demographers', *History Workshop Journal*, 28 (1989), 111–41, and S.C. Watkins, 'If all we knew about women was what we read in *Demography*, what would we know?', *Demography*, 30 (1993), 551–77, esp. 559.
  7. Wrigley and Schofield, *Population history of England*, 257, n. 99; Schofield, 'English marriage patterns', 4.
  8. Weir has suggested that, 'hard evidence from parish listings should become a priority for local studies, both to confirm the magnitude of celibacy and to provide answers to some basic historical questions about celibates', 'Rather never than late', 349–50.
  9. The best introductions to the Marriage Duty assessments is T. Arkell, 'An examination of the Poll Taxes of the later seventeenth century, the Marriage Duty Act and Gregory King', in K. Schürer and T. Arkell, eds, *Surveying the people: the interpretation and use of document sources for the study of population in the later seventeenth century*, (Oxford, 1992), esp. 163–71, and D.V. Glass, 'Introduction', in D.V. Glass, ed., *London inhabitants within the walls, 1695*, London Record Society, 2 (1966).
  10. See Glass, *London inhabitants*; P. Laslett, 'Mean household size in England since the sixteenth century', in P. Laslett and R. Wall, eds, *Household and family in past time*, (Cambridge, 1972), 125–58; R. Wall, 'Regional and temporal variations in English household structure since 1650', in J. Hobcraft and P. Rees, eds, *Regional demographic development*, (London, 1980), 89–116; D. Souden, 'Migrants and the population structure of later seventeenth-century provincial cities and market towns', in P. Clark, ed., *The transformation of English provincial towns*, (London, 1984), 133–68; J. Boulton, 'The Marriage Duty Act and parochial registration in London, 1695–1706', and K. Schürer, 'Variations in household structure in the late seventeenth century: toward a regional analysis', in Schürer and Arkell, eds, *Surveying the people*, 222–78.
  11. The Marriage Duty generated two types of documents for every English parish or ward: listings of inhabitants along with the duties and surcharges to which they were liable, as well as annual accounts of the duties paid. Only a small number of the second type of document have survived, but this article only uses the first type of document: Schürer, 'Variations in household structure', 257.
  12. For instance, in his study of household structure Schürer used assessments from five of the eight Southampton parishes, one of which was from 1695, two from 1696, and a further two from 1697. This means his conclusions are problematic since they leave out St Michael's, one of the two largest parishes in the town: see Schürer, 'Variations in household structure'. The 1696 Southampton assessments are complete in terms of listings of inhabitants. The taxes collected or accounts for 1696 are missing for some parishes, but as only the population listings are used here, this is not significant.
  13. The few histories of early modern Southampton include the articles by L.A. Burgess and E.

- Sandell in J.B. Morgan and P. Peberdy, eds, *Collected essays on Southampton*, (Southampton, 1961), 66–81; F.J. Monkhouse, ed., *A survey of Southampton and its region*, (Southampton, 1964), 218–31; A. Temple Patterson, *A history of Southampton 1700–1914*, (Southampton, 1966), 1–101; and A. Rance, *Southampton: an illustrated history*, (Portsmouth, 1986), 59–98. See also my dissertation on women in early modern Southampton (n. 2 above).
14. See 'Appendix: Suggested rules for interpreting English documents', in Laslett and Wall, *Household and family*, 86–9.
  15. Southampton Record Office (hereafter SRO), SC 14/2/66a-b, 67a-b, 68a-b, 69, 70a-b, 71, 72, 73a-c, 74a-c.
  16. Since the gender of 16 individuals in the Southampton listings is unclear, this number was subtracted from the total population of 3,001. This yields a population total of 2,985: 1,645 women and 1,340 men, and a sex ratio of 81.45. My figures can be compared to those of David Souden who recorded a population of 2,984 and a sex ratio of 82.4 for Southampton in 1696. The difference in our figures seems to result from Souden also deducting the 16 persons of unclear gender from his population total, but then inexplicably adding these 16 individuals into the male category when calculating the sex ratio. Souden's slightly higher ratio of 82.4 is incorrect, but he does note the trend of female-dominated sex ratios in seventeenth-century towns. Souden, 'Migrants and the population structure', 150, Table 17, and n. 56. See also C. Galley, *The demography of early modern towns: York in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*, (Liverpool, 1998), pp. 142–3.
  17. 'Appendix', in Laslett and Wall, *Household and family*, 86–9. Laslett and Wall suggest that those persons described in population listings as daughters, granddaughters, nieces, siblings, servants, sojourners, boarders, apprentices, and journey[wo]men 'can be presumed to be single'. To the single category were added women whose single marital status could be established from other Southampton sources. Wives were more easily categorized since Southampton's assessors always referred to a married woman as the 'wife of' their husband. The assessors also usually indicated the marital status of widows by referring to them explicitly as such. It was assumed that any woman listed with three children who all shared the same surname was a widow, since it was rare in Southampton for a singlewoman to have more than two illegitimate children with the same man. Women with no recorded marital status, who either had no children listed with them or less than three children, were included in the category of unmarried women, since they could have been either single mothers or widows. Some could also have been wives whose husbands were away from home (mariners, for instance), but this is unlikely since the Southampton assessors appear to have listed husbands whether they were at home on that day or not.
  18. For less than one per cent of the adult male population was it possible to determine that they were unmarried, but not more specifically whether they were bachelors or widowers.
  19. Whether singlewomen paid the tax themselves when they married has not been consistently established. For London, Glass noted that some singlewomen were recorded as paying the tax, while others were not: Glass, 'Introduction', xix. But Arkell says that husbands paid the duties on marriage: Arkell, 'An examination of the poll taxes', 167.
  20. Although, at a similar date, the Poll Tax of 1692–3 declared that wealthy singlewomen with estates worth at least £1,000 were liable for the first time: Arkell, 'An examination of the poll taxes', 146, Table 1, and 157.
  21. Various schemes to encourage marriage appeared at the end of the seventeenth century. Contemporaries worried that Englishmen (but not women) were eschewing the marital state. Many of these schemes advocated taxing bachelors in order to persuade them to marry. See, for instance, *Marriage promoted*, (London, 1690), 24; John Dunton, *The ladies dictionary*, (London, 1694), 236–39, and *The levellers*, (London, 1703).
  22. 'Appendix', in Laslett and Wall, *Household and family*, 86–9.
  23. While Schürer, 'Variations in household structure', acknowledged that so-called 'children' might not be minors, he did not attempt to amend his calculations on proportions of children in the English population.
  24. Wall looks at two groups: single females aged 15 to 45 and those over 45. His use of the age 15 and the fact that he refers to the females aged 15–45 as 'never married women' implies that he

- counts females aged 15 and over as adults. But he is vague about this. R. Wall, 'Woman alone in English society', *Annales de Demographie Historique*, 17 (1981), 303–17, especially Table 2.
25. Historians are not definitively agreed on the age of majority for women in the early modern period. Adulthood was different for women than for men and was multi-phased for both genders. Economic adulthood began in the mid-teens when females began to support themselves in great numbers, often in service. Religious adulthood began for both males and females in the mid-teens, when they became full communicants of the Church of England and could serve as godparents. Legal adulthood can be measured by the age at which females inherited, which was (if not at marriage) most commonly at the age of 16, 18, or 21. But females were able to serve as executrices, contract debts, and sue in civil courts at age 18. I.K. Ben-Amos says childhood ended and young adulthood, or youth, began in the mid-teens, at which point an individual began to take on more responsibilities. I.K. Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and youth in early modern England*, (New Haven, 1994), chapter 1, especially 30, 36, 38. For evidence on female legal adulthood in wills, see Peters, 'Single women', 334; R.T. Vann, 'Wills and the family in an English town: Banbury 1550–1800', *Journal of Family History*, 4 (1979), 362; Froide, 'Single women, work and community in Southampton', 305.
  26. These listings come from the papers of the political arithmetician Gregory King, who made use of data from the Marriage Duty assessments. Although based on the Marriage Duty assessments, these particular listings included additional information that King obtained, such as the age of some of Harefield's inhabitants.
  27. Reproduced in D.V. Glass, 'Gregory King's estimate of the population of England and Wales', *Population Studies*, 3 (1950), 348; and in E. Cuthbertson, *Gregory King's Harefield*, (Uxbridge, 1992), 8–9.
  28. These listings are also from Gregory King's own papers. King was from the town of Lichfield and may have had access to additional information about its inhabitants: Glass, 'Gregory King's estimate', 364.
  29. P. Styles, 'A census of a Warwickshire village in 1698', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 3 (1951–2), 39–40. Fenny Compton's total population was 415, 197 of whom were women. Styles estimated the percentage of single people (not just women) of marriageable age in the village at around 15 per cent. To find the percentage of adult women who were single, I made my own calculations using Styles' figures (which are admittedly vague and contradictory at points). Styles listed 135 adult women: 71 wives, 16 widows, and 13 unmarried (by which he seems to mean single) women, plus an additional 35 servants and strangers who he counted as single females. He said he assumed the latter group consisted largely of women who he believed were likely to have been unmarried (i.e. single). Turning these figures into percentages, the adult female population of Fenny Compton consisted of 52.5 per cent married women, 11.9 per cent widowed women, and 35.6 per cent singlewomen. Since Styles' assumption that all the servants and strangers were female may be overstated, it would be safe to lower the estimated percentage adult females in the village who were single to 32 or 33 per cent.
  30. Glass, 'Gregory King's estimate', 338–74, esp. 364.
  31. D.V. Glass, 'Notes on the demography of London at the end of the seventeenth century', *Daedalus*, 97 (1968), 583–84, 586.
  32. Laslett, 'Mean household size', in Laslett and Wall, *Household and family*, 145. A good overview of the many arguments and estimates concerning the proportion of children in early modern England is found in T. Arkell, 'A method for estimating population totals from the Compton census returns', in Schürer and Arkell, *Surveying the people*, 97–116. Arkell believes that while contemporaries and present-day historians have estimated that children under 16 comprised between 30–42 per cent of early modern England's population, population listings for the very late seventeenth century tend towards a higher figure of about 40 per cent: 'Method for estimating population totals', 100–2. I have therefore used the latter figure in my calculations.