Introduction

Gender and nationality are two important categories impacting upon individuals’ economic opportunities, often in tandem. Data provided by Eurostat shows that in 2017, the employment rate among native-born men in the twenty-eight member states of the European Union was higher, at 78.3 per cent, than among foreign-born men, at 75.9 per cent. Native-born women were markedly worse off than both male groups, with a figure of 67.7 per cent. Lower still than the employment rates for foreign-born men and native-born women were those for foreign-born women, at 58.9 per cent. This so-called ‘double disadvantage’, with immigrant women experiencing the adverse consequences of both their gender and nationality, continues to be observed in many other parts of the world as well. Since the 1990s, the interplay between immigration, gender and economic opportunity has also been the subject of a growing number of historical studies. In the first edition of Moving Europeans, her overview of European migration from 1650 to the present, published in 1992, Leslie Page Moch still deplored that ‘of all individual characteristics that influence the migration experience, gender is perhaps the most fundamental but least systematically explored’. By the time the second edition of her synthesis came out, in 2003, she already had to acknowledge that ‘much of the new work [...] is sensitive to the differences between the experiences of men and women’, particularly when studying the connection between migration and labour. The field has only expanded further ever since. Adopting frameworks from the social sciences and driven by feminist scholarship, historians have explored male and female immigrants’ access to the labour market, their working lives and remuneration, as
well as their relationship to native workers. What the majority of these studies has revealed is that, also throughout history, the economic patterns of immigrant women differed from those of immigrant men and those of native men and women. Yet, even after nearly thirty years of scholarship on the subject, substantial lacunae remain. While a myriad of studies on the link between immigration, gender and work are now available for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, much less has been done on the early modern period and later Middle Ages.

The absence of studies on immigration, gender and economic opportunity also applies to later medieval England. This problem is partly due to the overall lack of attention for this period in the historiography of migration to the British Isles. For decades, migration historians focused on the waves of conquerors and settlers from the Romans and Anglo-Saxons to the Vikings and the Normans, before jumping straight to the arrival of Protestant refugees around the middle of the sixteenth century. Still, a limited number of thematic and local case studies paid attention to the presence and professional activities of immigrant men in England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Meanwhile, no systematic work was done on immigrant women, their economic experiences and their relationship to alien men. One notable exception is the study of prostitution and marginality. Ruth Karras and others have demonstrated how female immigrants, who did not have the support networks of native women, were particularly active as prostitutes in later medieval English cities. For a glimpse of the fates of immigrant women in other sectors of the English economy, we had to wait until Judith Bennett’s 2018 article on Scottish immigrants. Drawing on the returns of the alien subsidy, a tax imposed specifically on immigrant residents in England, Bennett showed how, around the middle of the fifteenth century, high numbers of female Scots crossed the border to work as servants and labourers in the north of the country.
This article will explore how immigration, gender and economic opportunity intersected in England during the fifteenth century, exploiting the same sources utilised by Bennett. The returns of the alien subsidy do not only inform us about Scottish men and women, but about a much wider range of immigrants in England. During the 1430s, setbacks in the wars with France and Burgundy resulted in a growth in tension between England’s native and immigrant populations. Within this context, several primarily London-based groups capitalised on the concern that aliens, that is people living in the kingdom but born abroad, possessed greater wealth than the native population but were not taxed proportionately. At the parliament of 1439-40, they pushed through a poll tax on all non-English people over the age of twelve residing in the country. It covered the whole of the realm except for the palatinates of Chester and Durham and was initially granted for a period of two years, but was renewed quite regularly during the 1440s, 1450s and 1460s. No alien subsidies were raised between 1471 and 1483, when the tax was resumed until 1487. The alien subsidy was payable at two different rates: ‘householders’, or relatively established people such as artisans or tradesmen, were expected to contribute 16d. per year. ‘Non-householders’, who were mainly servants, apprentices and labourers, paid 6d. per year. Members of religious orders and Welsh residents were exempt, something later extended to the Irish, the Channel Islanders, Normans, Gascons and Italian, Iberian, German and Breton merchants. Information on the immigrant taxpayers was supplied to the sheriffs or justices of the peace by local juries of English-born men, then sent on to the exchequer and used to produce nominal tax lists. Many of these lists have been preserved, providing us with a nation-wide survey of alien presence. Details recorded include immigrants’ names and places of residence, often also their occupations and places of origin or nationalities. Alien wives of English or Welsh men were exempt, and therefore not recorded. Immigrant wives of immigrant men were not taxed separately but were often recorded in the lists alongside
their paying husbands. Alien single women and widows were taxed and recorded on their own.¹¹

Made available digitally in 2015, the information from the alien subsidy returns has provoked a renewed interest in the history of immigration in England during the later Middle Ages and can also serve to answer questions about the economic status of alien women and their relationship to men.¹² Some of these questions are informed by the wider debate on the position of women in post-Black Death England which, unlike the specific scholarship on female immigrants, has been prolific. In 1989, Caroline Barron posited that women living in later medieval England experienced something of a ‘golden age’. The fall in population levels caused by the arrival of the Black Death, in 1348, and the continuing high levels of mortality in subsequent decades, she argued, led to a depletion of the workforce, allowing women to engage in independent occupations previously inaccessible to them.¹³ Barron later specified that this improvement applied most to major English towns, London and York in particular.¹⁴ Jeremy Goldberg believed that women in post-plague England were able to take advantage of the stronger demand for life-cycle service resulting from the labour shortages: girls moved away from their families to work as servants in other households, most commonly in English towns. Relying on their own economic means, they could remain single for longer periods, choose their marriage partners more freely and set up their own households.¹⁵ More recently, Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden claimed that these developments allowed women to gain more economic independence and autonomy in deciding whom to marry not only in England, but also in the Low Countries.¹⁶ However, the ‘golden age’ thesis was rejected by others, most notably Judith Bennett, who contended that, also during the century and a half after the Black Death, women’s status remained confined by patriarchal structures and women continued to work in the lowest-status occupations.¹⁷
Did immigrant women in fifteenth-century England have access to those independent occupations which, according to Barron, became more available after the Black Death and how did they compare in this respect to immigrant men and native women? Could female aliens benefit from the stronger demand for life-cycle service? If so, did this provide them with a platform for economic improvement, as Goldberg, De Moor and Luiten Van Zanden claimed, or do the alien subsidy returns suggest more limited prospects? We should, however, also wonder whether female immigrants had the same economic expectations as native women and alien men and whether their experiences should be judged by the same standards. This article will conclude that the economic patterns of immigrant women in fifteenth-century England were markedly different from those of immigrant men and native women, but that this should not necessarily be taken as evidence of a lack of female economic opportunities. In fact, the opposite may be true: when interpreted in a wider, transnational context, the alien subsidy data could suggest that women in later medieval Europe enjoyed opportunities for professional mobility and economic betterment unavailable during any earlier period.

**Numbers and gender ratios**

Before we assess the economic opportunities of immigrant women in relation to those of immigrant men and native women, their numbers must be established. Immigrants were listed in the alien subsidy records on 55,199 occasions between 1440 and 1487. In 1440, when the alien subsidy was first collected, 15,901 aliens were recorded. Taking into consideration those not taxed, including the exempt groups, the immigrants residing in peculiar jurisdictions such as Chester and Durham and the alien children under the age of twelve, the total number of non-English residents in the country in 1440 could have been as high as 30,000, which would represent between 1.2 and 1.5 per cent of an overall English population of 2-2.5 million. 5,216 of the 15,901 aliens enumerated in 1440 had their nationality specified in the documents. 2,214,
or 42 per cent of those 5,216, were said to have come from France or from particular regions and principalities within France, such as Normandy, Brittany or Picardy. 1,105 people, or 21 per cent, were labelled as Scottish and 817, or 16 per cent, as Irish. 920 immigrants, or 18 per cent of those with a nationality, were recorded as ‘Dutch’, the designation given to people from the Low Countries and Germany, or were said to originate from one of the principalities within this area, such as Flanders, Brabant or Holland. Smaller numbers of aliens came from the Channel Islands, Iceland, the Italian city-states, the Iberian Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean. 1,836 immigrants, or about 12 per cent of the 15,901 aliens listed nationwide in 1440, lived in the city of London or the neighbouring borough of Southwark. These 1,836 immigrants represented about 7 per cent of the capital’s total population at that time.

In 5,998 of the 55,199 entries over the whole span of the alien subsidy records, or 11 per cent, the immigrants recorded were women. However, this gender ratio was not constant throughout the period in which the tax was collected. In 1440, 2,372 of the 15,901 people listed, or 15 per cent, were female. During the 1440s, women account for 14 per cent of all entries (see Figure 1). In the 1450s, the ratio drops to 7 per cent, and in the 1460s to only 4 per cent. In the 1470s, when the amount of data is especially sparse, women were responsible for 9 per cent of all entries and in the 1480s, the proportion rose again to 14 per cent. Rather than accurately reflecting the ups and downs of female migration to England, these trends should make us aware of the quirks of the evidence. During the 1450s and 1460s, the alien subsidies were administered less rigorously than in the 1440s and 1480s, and details of the immigrants, such as their nationalities, were recorded less often. In this context, the subsidy collectors were also more inclined to leave out the names of taxpayers’ alien wives, who were not taxed separately but could be recorded in the assessment rolls. So, whereas immigrant wives account for 6 per cent of all entries in the alien subsidy returns during the 1440s and 7 per cent in the 1480s, they represent only 2 per cent in the 1450s and 0.01 per cent in the 1460s. While no
returns provide an exhaustive enumeration of all alien women in the realm, it thus seems likely that the figures of the 1440s and 1480s, and the 15 per cent of the first collection in 1440 in particular, give the closest available approximation to the gender ratio among immigrants in England.

**Figure 1:** female immigrants recorded in alien subsidies by decade

Gender ratios also varied according to the different national groups of immigrants coming to England. Only one female Italian was recorded by the alien subsidy assessors, and women were responsible for only 4 per cent of all instances in which French people were recorded (including those from regions such as Normandy and Brittany). By contrast, female immigrants accounted for 19 per cent of all occasions on which Icelanders were listed and 25 per cent of instances of Scots. To some extent, these figures reflect the different migration patterns characteristic of each group. The majority of Italian immigrants to England were merchants who arrived as young, single men and stayed in the country only for a short phase; in most cases, they did not marry in England. The very high proportion of men among French incomers could reflect the emergency in northern France, where, at the end of the Hundred Years War, territories held for decades by the English were rapidly reconquered by the French, and the possibility that young, single men had more choice and freedom than women or married men to seek refuge abroad. Yet, here again, we should be careful not to take the sources at face value. Women account for 11 per cent of the instances in which immigrants were recorded as ‘Dutch’, the designation used for people from the Low Countries and Germany. Among the ‘Teutonics’, the alternative label applied to aliens from the Low Countries and Germany in London and Berkshire during the 1480s, however, female immigrants were responsible for 24 per cent of all entries. The difference can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that more alien wives were recorded in the 1480s and in London than in earlier decades and in other
places in the country: while only 3 per cent of ‘Dutch’ men were listed with a spouse, more than 18 per cent of ‘Teutonic’ men were.

Accounting for the number of alien women missing in the records is, inevitably, highly speculative. In the city of London in 1483, when the assessors for the alien subsidy seem to have listed alien wives quite consistently, 19 per cent of the recorded alien men were said to have married immigrant women.\(^2\) In Southwark in 1440, as many as 26 per cent of immigrant men were recorded alongside their alien wives.\(^3\) There are reasons to believe, however, that marriage to people of one’s own nationality was more frequent among the larger, more settled immigrant populations in the capital and other towns in the South than elsewhere in England. If we assume that 15 per cent of the alien men listed in the returns across the country in 1440 (when the documents are most complete) were married to alien women, instead of the 7 per cent recorded as such, we should add another 1,200 immigrant wives to the number of alien women for that year. As stated above, alien wives of English or Welsh men were not enumerated in the alien subsidy records at all, which makes their number even harder to estimate. In 1440, 1,526 alien women were listed in the records as unmarried, which would make them theoretically available on the English marriage market. Assuming that this number would have been roughly similar during previous generations, we may hazard, as an informed guess, that about half of them, or 750 immigrant women, could have been living in the country as the wives of English or Welsh men at that point. As alien single women were expected to pay the tax on their own, there are no particular reasons to suppose that substantial numbers of them were omitted from the tax lists. Adding in the estimates for immigrant wives of both alien and English/Welsh men would bring the total number of alien women in 1440 up to 5,128. This provides us with a gender ratio of 333 immigrant men for every 100 immigrant women for that year, as opposed to 570 men for every 100 women when taking the sources at face value (see Figure 2).
**Figure 2:** gender ratios among total and immigrant population in later medieval England

Even if we apply more generous multipliers for the women missing in the records, this figure would remain markedly higher than the overall gender ratio for later medieval England. Surveying a variety of documentary and archaeological sources, Sandy Bardsley suggested that English men outnumbered English women during the post-Black Death period by a ratio of 110 or 115 to 100.24 The gender ratios among immigrants in English towns in 1440 are slightly lower than the figure for immigrants across the country, which can be explained by the higher numbers of alien wives in these urban communities, referred to earlier. In London, 290 immigrant men were recorded for every 100 immigrant women in 1440, in Bristol 270, in Southwark 267. (These figures do not make allowances for missing alien wives, because, as explained above, these were recorded more consistently in larger, urban centres). Yet here, too, there is a marked difference with the overall gender ratios of most English towns, where late fourteenth-century poll tax evidence suggests that women outnumbered men by a narrow margin, partly as a result of high female immigration from the countryside.25 Even if we account for the fragmentary evidence, migration to England during the later Middle Ages thus seems to have been clearly gendered, with, perhaps, up to three times as many foreign men settling in the country than women. These findings appear to confirm one of the celebrated nineteenth-century migration laws of E. G. Ravenstein, stating that men were more likely to migrate over longer distances than women, and go against much of the recent scholarship on medieval migration, which, often drawing on archaeological evidence, has seen a tendency to challenge Ravenstein’s and other male-dominated narratives.26

**Independent occupations**

In order to understand the relatively low numbers of female immigrants recorded during the second half of the fifteenth century, it is important to explore the economic opportunities
available to them. Occupations are given in 1,461 (24 per cent) of the 5,998 occasions on which women were listed in the alien subsidy returns. This is somewhat less than for the male entries, where professional activities were specified in 31 per cent of cases. This section focuses on aliens recorded in the alien subsidies as being involved in independent occupations, that is, working on their own or with their partners, but not in the service of others. Female immigrants were employed as such in only 1 per cent of the cases in which occupations were given (see Table 1). By contrast, alien men were described as independent workers in 27 per cent of the male entries in which occupational information was provided. It is possible that the details of immigrant women independently employed in these jobs were recorded less consistently in the alien subsidy returns than was the case for immigrant men. As female aliens in independent occupations were more likely to be householders and, therefore, higher taxpayers, however, it would have been illogical for the tax assessors to do so.

Table 1: independent occupations among immigrant men and women and English women with recorded occupations

Comparable figures indicating the share of the English female workforce employed independently are scarce. Patchy and often lacking occupational information on women, the poll tax returns of 1377, 1379 and 1381 do not allow to paint a national picture. Figures for some places are available though. 62 per cent of all unmarried women in Southwark and 31 per cent of all unmarried women in Oxford had an independent occupation in 1381. In Howden, a market town in Southern Yorkshire, 15 per cent of women, both single and married, were involved in these jobs in the same year. 27 Exceptionally, figures can be compared in the same place, albeit with a fifty-nine year time gap. In Southwark in 1440, for example, 39 per cent of immigrant men who had their occupations recorded and 6 per cent of immigrant women were said to be working independently. 28 In most cases, however, the fragmentary nature of the records does not allow such comparison. While the data is too disparate to draw firm
conclusions, it does seem that the figures of English women in independent occupations are nowhere as low as those of female immigrants.

Another way to determine employment opportunities in independent occupations is to assess the variety of such jobs available to male and female immigrants, and to native women. Immigrant men were recorded as working independently in 183 different occupations, covering just about all occupational sectors, in the alien subsidy returns between 1440 and 1487. The opportunities for native women, who, according to Barron, gained more access to these jobs during the post-Black Death period, seem to have been more limited. Drawing on the 1377–81 poll tax returns and a wealth of other evidence from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Goldberg identified female workers active in a relatively wide range of sectors, especially in towns. They were most conspicuous in the victualling trades, the textile-producing and clothing sectors (weavers, spinsters, seamstresses, cappers) and mercantile jobs (cloth sellers, hucksters), but also figured in fairly high numbers in the metal crafts (pinners, smiths), the production of finished goods (chandlers, bookbinders) and a myriad of service trades (nurses, barbers, laundresses, ferrywomen). In the English countryside, women were independently employed in activities connected to the pastoral economy as well. Some occupational sectors that did involve immigrant men, however, including the leather industries, the woodworking and building trades and clerical positions, were mostly out of reach for English women.29 Still, both alien men and native women seem to have worked in a much wider range of specialisms than female immigrants.

Alien women were listed as working in only ten different independent occupations in the alien subsidy records between 1440 and 1487. Fifteen female immigrants were said to be employed in the textile and clothing trades. Eight of these, including four from Ireland, worked as spinsters.30 Two ‘Teutonic’ flaxwives (women involved in the production of linen) lived in London in 1483, and a female Scottish weaver, the widow Marion Scot, managed her own
business at Cawood, a village in Yorkshire, in 1440. In the same year, in Southwark, the
capper Joan Yonge teamed up with her father. In Suffolk in 1483, Alice Josip from Flanders
worked independently as a hat maker in Ipswich, and the Flemish wife of Nicholas Blok, whose
first name is unknown, ran a tailoring business with her husband in Stoke by Nayland. One
alien woman got a foothold in a trade in which English women were strongly represented.
Associated with the company of the mercers, the London silkwomen had obtained a monopoly
on the retail of small silk items in the capital city. Among them was the ‘Teutonic’ Mariona
Jerbray who, in 1483, employed her own alien servant.

In the victualling trades, three female immigrants provided food in 1440. They include
the Irish baker Agnes Hirde in Kendal (Westmorland) and the hucksters or petty food retailers
Emma Benton in Newcastle upon Tyne and Isabella Hukster in Southwark. An alien tapster
called Rosa (no surname recorded) worked in Bristol’s Broad Street in 1440; and in Lynn
(Norfolk), Alice Hosedowyn from Brabant sold beer in 1483. Yet, whereas a fair number
of English women were active in the ale brewing business, the larger-scale and more capital-
intensive brewing of beer, a specialty of immigrants from the Low Countries, appears to have
been reserved for alien men, at least according to the alien subsidies. Marion (no surname
given), a nurse in a Canterbury household in 1440, was the only female immigrant recorded in
the servicing trades. No alien women were listed as working in other occupational sectors,
including those that did involve English women, such as the metalworking industries and the
production of goods outside the textile and clothing business. If women in England had better
chances of working in independent occupations during the century and a half following the
Black Death, as Barron argued, the alien subsidies thus suggest this mostly applied to native
women. This lack of opportunities for female immigrants may be one of the reasons why
women migrated to England in much smaller numbers than men during this period.
The image that alien women lacked independent economic agency, or at least had markedly less agency than alien men, is corroborated by other indicators in the alien subsidy returns. Female immigrants employed alien servants on twenty-one occasions. This represents 0.5 per cent of all female entries, excluding alien women who were assessed as servants themselves and could therefore not have hired other servants. Male immigrants were classified as masters of alien servants on 929 occasions, or 2.5 per cent of all male entries excluding servant men. Ten of the female employers also had male servants.\textsuperscript{40} Joan Crede, for example, whose nationality was not specified, had two alien men working for her in Bristol’s St Thomas parish in 1441.\textsuperscript{41} One woman, the ‘Teutonic’ widow Barbara Frean, was recorded as lodging other aliens: she had six ‘Teutonics’, three male and three female, staying in her house in London’s Dowgate ward in 1483.\textsuperscript{42} Immigrant men provided accommodation to other aliens on twenty-eight occasions, lodging both men and women, between 1440 and 1487.\textsuperscript{43}

Alien women were also assessed less often as householders, the higher tax category that included most, though not all, aliens with an independent occupation. Married immigrants should be excluded from these statistics, as husbands were categorised as householders by default when a couple paid the higher tax rate. The aforementioned wife of Nicholas Blok, for instance, was recorded as a tailor in 1483 but was not categorised as a householder, as her husband paid the higher rate for the whole family.\textsuperscript{44} Yet 41 per cent of unmarried alien men were listed as householders, as opposed to only 16 per cent of unmarried alien women (see Figure 3). It was explained above that these ‘unmarried’ immigrant men will have included an unspecified number of husbands not recorded as such, though not enough to fundamentally alter these figures. Again, there are also no reasons to assume that information on householder status would have been recorded less consistently for female than for male immigrants, as this would have resulted in a loss of fiscal revenue. The information about fiscal status from the alien subsidy returns does seem to confirm Barron’s point that women in the major urban
centres, London in particular, were better off than women elsewhere: 40 per cent of alien female householders were assessed in the capital, as were eleven of the twenty-one alien mistresses. Yet, this, too, should be put into perspective: even in London, unmarried alien women were listed as non-householders in 82 per cent of the entries in the alien subsidies (as opposed to 63 per cent among unmarried immigrant men in the city).

**Figure 3:** fiscal status of immigrants recorded in alien subsidies

Judged by the indicators provided in the alien subsidy returns, immigrant widows seem to have had more economic agency than other foreign women in the tax lists. When it comes to fiscal status, they even outdid unmarried male immigrants: in 62 per cent of the cases in which alien widows were assessed, they were considered capable of paying the higher householder rate, as opposed to 41 per cent for unmarried immigrant men and 16 per cent for unmarried immigrant women (see Figure 3). Nine of the twenty-one women employing alien servants and the only woman who lodged other immigrants in the subsidies were widows, as were two of the nineteen female immigrants involved in independent occupations, the silkwoman Mariona Jerbray and the weaver Marion Scot. Unfortunately, the occupations of most widows were not recorded. Of the seventy-seven women assessed as widows between 1440 and 1487, fifty-one were attributed a nationality. Twenty-eight of these fifty-one, or more than half, were ‘Teutonic’, most of whom lived in London. No information is given on any of their late husbands, though it seems likely that many would have been involved in the artisan businesses so common among ‘Dutch’ immigrants in English cities.

It is unclear how the legal position of alien widows in England compared to that of native-born ones and, therefore, to what extent they had access to the property of their spouses. English men in the fifteenth century could leave their goods and chattels freely to their wives or, in the dioceses of London and York, were bound to the practice of legitim, entitling widows to one third of their late husbands’ belongings (half if there were no children). There are no
indications that the situation for immigrant women in England was fundamentally different. English widows could also claim dower, which usually consisted of one third of their late husband’s real property (half without children). This was more problematic for foreign-born widows as they, like all other immigrants in the country, were not entitled to own real estate. One way around this problem was to acquire so-called letters of denization. These grants, issued by the royal chancery in return for a fee from the 1380s onwards, bestowed privileges upon the alien recipient which were usually reserved for native-born people, including the right to inherit, own and dispose of land, houses and tenements.

Alien widows were frequent recipients of these denization documents, albeit alien widows of English men. One example is Beatrice, the Portuguese-born wife of the English knight Gilbert Lord Talbot. After Talbot had died on the battlefield in Rouen in 1418, she claimed as her dower part of his estate, dispersed over nine English counties. Beatrice was assigned the manors in 1419, but only after she had acquired denization papers. The documents did not prevent her late husband’s relatives from trying to take back some of the properties by force when she prepared to remarry in 1423. The letters of denization granted to Gertrude, the alien wife of London citizen William de Limes, in 1440 expressly made her capable of claiming dower on the death of her husband. In the case of alien widows of immigrant men, their husbands could only have acquired real estate if the latter had taken out denization papers themselves. Often, these documents specified that not only the male recipient, but also his wife and other heirs were entitled to own and inherit real property. Because of the high costs, however, the denization process was only accessible to the most affluent of immigrants.

Unlike alien widows, immigrant wives do not seem to have had considerable economic agency, at least not according to the alien subsidies: only one, the Flemish wife of Nicholas Blok, was recorded with an independent occupation. We should bear in mind, however, that
the alien subsidy returns do not necessarily tell the whole story. A study of the borough court
rolls of Great Yarmouth, a port town in Norfolk, has made clear that several alien women
recorded in the subsidies without an occupation actually participated in a range of economic
activities in the town, including retail and hostelling. They were also active in the beer trade,
at least until it became a larger-scale, year-round business from the mid-1450s onwards.56 Most
of such work was done on an informal basis in the context of the household, and this may be
the reason why it was only referred to intermittently in the alien subsidy returns.

In this context, Alexandra Shepard has argued that the recording of women as the wives
of working husbands in early modern England should be considered not simply as a statement
of marital status but also as an acknowledgement of the wife’s production and retail activities,
as well as the management of assets, linked to the household.57 If this were to apply to the
fifteenth-century alien subsidy returns, the picture of alien female professional activity in
general and that of immigrant wives in particular would look more positive, certainly in the
artisan sector: 291 alien women were listed as the wives of immigrant men with independent
occupations, mostly ‘Teutonic’ and ‘Dutch’ tailors, weavers, cordwainers and cobblers (these
are the more established alien households in urban areas where the number of unrecorded
immigrant wives was limited). Yet even when factoring in the alien wives of immigrant men,
the proportion of economically active female immigrants recorded in this sector would remain
far below that of alien men and that of alien women listed as working in service, explored in
the final section of this article. Moreover, considering the marital status of these female
immigrants as an acknowledgement of their professional activity would confirm Bennett’s
point that most women were only able to do more rewarding jobs within the patriarchal
structures of the household.58

If alien wives were economically active, their legal position, as well as that of
immigrant widows, did not necessarily compare well with the situation in their homelands.
Although customary law in the Low Countries, where many of the alien wives and widows in England came from, was characterised by a strong local diversity, it guaranteed married women relatively easy access to goods and capital. In England, the wife’s goods and chattels belonged to the husband, who could use them as he pleased.\textsuperscript{59} By contrast, in most of the Low Countries, a married woman maintained a right to any property she brought into the marriage, although she could only manage it under her husband’s guardianship. If the latter wanted to use his wife’s belongings, he needed her or her family’s consent. Any increase of the couple’s property after the marriage belonged equally to both partners. Whereas widows in England could claim one third of their late husband’s goods and chattels or, in the dioceses of London and York, were dependent on his testamentary dispositions, their counterparts in the Low Countries regained full control over their personal property and inherited a large part, usually half, of the communal property.\textsuperscript{60} This relatively unrestricted access to goods and capital allowed women in the Low Countries to be economically independent, at least in some areas. Even though they were generally, and increasingly, excluded from most guild-regulated activities, wives and widows in Flemish and Brabantine cities were remarkably active as entrepreneurs, managing businesses in trade, cloth production and the financial sector without much interference from men.\textsuperscript{61} For women from the Low Countries, or at least their most urbanised areas, migrating to England could thus have resulted in a loss of legal and economic freedom. This may also say something about the agency of the migration of households from these areas. People moved to England during this period for a variety of reasons, including political disturbances and even environmental disasters. Yet if a couple from the Low Countries migrated because of economic pull-factors, these are most likely to have been economic prospects for the husband, not the wife.

\textbf{Prostitution}
We noted earlier that alien women involved in one specific occupation have received attention in historiography. According to Ruth Karras, it was common for female immigrants, who lacked their usual support networks abroad and were often barred from more morally accepted occupations, to engage in prostitution in English towns, either as prostitutes or as brothel keepers. In later medieval London, alien prostitutes even advertised their foreign ethnicity as a selling point. Many sources suggest that women from the Low Countries were particularly prominent in this line of work. A London proclamation of 1393 concerning prostitution singled out ‘Flemish women, who profess and follow such a shameful and dolorous life’. In Great Yarmouth, it was decided in 1395 that a woman with the ‘Dutch’ name Lycebet Janpetresson was not allowed in the town except in a striped hood, a piece of clothing used to distinguish prostitutes, and could only dwell on the Dene, the sandy area outside the town walls, ‘where women of such sort live’. Between 1430 and 1490, at least five brothels operated by ‘Dutch’ immigrants were active in the town. Three were run by men, two by women. Southwark had several Flemish ‘stews’ or brothels, and one of them was the object of anti-alien hostility during the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. In the 1430s, when the political relations between England and the Burgundian Low Countries turned sour, petitions denounced the Southwark stews as meeting places for enemy aliens. English literary sources, such as Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale* and Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, equally represented Flemings as being commonly associated with paid sex. This prominence of immigrants from the Low Countries in prostitution is also attested in other places in fifteenth-century Europe, including Florence and the Rhone Valley.

Occupations in the prostitution sector were not systematically recorded in the alien subsidy returns. Alan Patynmaker, for example, was one of those ‘Dutchmen’ fined for running a brothel in Great Yarmouth but was assessed without an occupation in the tax lists in 1440. Still, the alien subsidy returns provide clues to the activities of immigrant women in the prostitution business. Two alien women had the word ‘frowe’ added to their names, at least
another seventeen were recorded with the surname ‘Frowe’ or ‘Frow’.\textsuperscript{71} The term, which is Middle Dutch for ‘woman’, could be a generic designation for female immigrants from the Low Countries, but was used in other English sources of the time to denote sex workers.\textsuperscript{72} The majority of these women worked in London, with smaller numbers in Essex and Kent. In Southwark in 1440, the alien Arnold Lovell was assessed as a hosteller ‘of the stews’, and two immigrant women, Katherine Mason and Katherine Wytte, were described as servants ‘of the stews’. Probably Arnold was a brothel keeper and the two Katherines were either his aides or prostitutes working for him.\textsuperscript{73} In the port of Boston (Lincolnshire), the evocative names given to eight alien women in 1440, including ‘Blaak Margaret’, ‘Long Grete’ and ‘Flemish Lysbet’, suggest that they, too, may have run or worked in a brothel. Five of these eight were also, rather unusually, described as singlewomen.\textsuperscript{74}

If we accept that these references actually relate to sex work, the number of female immigrants in the alien subsidy records active in the low-status prostitution sector adds up to twenty-nine, or more than all alien women with an independent occupation discussed in the previous section. Many more must have been listed without a stigmatising name or addition. Fifteen of the twenty nine-women linked to prostitution, including all those in Boston, were assessed as householders, suggesting at least some independent agency (or an attempt by the tax collector to tax them more heavily). Because English women active in the sex work industry were not systematically recorded in tax sources either, it is difficult to place these figures in a comparative perspective.\textsuperscript{75} Apart from Lovell, no immigrant men were associated with prostitution in the alien subsidy returns.

\textbf{Working in service}

If female immigrants were described as working in independent occupations in only a small minority of the cases and prostitution-related activities were not recorded systematically, then
what did most women in the alien subsidy returns do for a living? They were listed as labourers, or workers who carried out a variety of unskilled tasks for a day wage, in 2 per cent of the instances in which occupations were given. Alien men were recorded as labourers in 4 per cent of the cases with occupational details. The overwhelming majority of female immigrants in the alien subsidy returns, however, were said to be working in service. In no fewer than 1,382 (95 per cent) of the 1,461 instances in which female occupations were recorded, women were identified as servants, ‘common’ servants or ‘former’ servants (see Table 2). By contrast, men were described as servants in only 69 per cent of the male entries in the alien subsidy rolls in which occupations were specified. Data from the poll tax returns on the share of the English female workforce employed in service is, again, very patchy. In Southwark, 38 per cent of unmarried English women with an occupation were described as servants in 1381. Fifty-nine years later in the same borough, 61 per cent of alien men and 94 per cent of alien women listed with a job were also recorded as such. In Oxford in 1381, 69 per cent of unmarried women with an occupation worked in service, in Howden 85 per cent of all women with a job, wives included. In addition to the earlier caveats, only people over the age of fourteen were liable to pay the poll tax, compared to a minimum age of twelve for the alien subsidy. As a result, a number of young servants may not have been covered by the poll tax returns whereas their immigrant counterparts in the same age group were recorded in the alien subsidy rolls. Some historians also argue that servants were most likely to evade the poll tax, but this equally applies to immigrant servants and the alien subsidies.

Table 2: servants among immigrant men and women and English women with recorded occupations

It should be stressed, though, that the definition of ‘servant’ during the later Middle Ages was a particularly nebulous one and could relate to a wide range of work activities. The term could, for example, refer to those completing an apprenticeship with established
craftspeople with the goal of becoming skilled artisans themselves. The continuously high numbers of male independent craftsmen from the Low Countries, Germany and, to a lesser extent, Ireland throughout the alien subsidy returns suggest that at least part of the younger men of the same nationalities recorded as servants must have been training for these jobs as apprentices. The records even allow us to reconstruct some of these men’s professional ascendance: described as servants in 1440, the alien Richard Batyn, living in Bristol, and the Frenchman Tilman Cok, based in Exeter, had started their own goldsmith’s shops by the following year. In theory, women such as the ‘Teutonic’ Katherine Johnson, Alicia Bynnyn and Nelkyn Josyon, recorded as servants of the shoemaker Peter Johnson in London in 1483, could equally have trained with their employers as apprentices. However, the very low numbers of female immigrants recorded in the alien subsidy rolls as independent craftspeople during later stages of their lives suggest that this was a relatively unusual route for alien women. All but some of the women assessed as servants in the subsidy returns probably earned their living as domestic workers or as helpers in the artisanal and agricultural sectors. This was probably also true for most female servants in the poll tax lists, though the higher number of English women in independent occupations, explored above, suggests that apprenticeships may have been more of an option for them than for their alien counterparts.

That nearly all immigrant women recorded with an occupation in the alien subsidy returns worked in service does not necessarily mean that later medieval England offered them no opportunities for economic improvement. The most institutionalised form of service during this period was one whereby people contracted their work to a master, usually for a year, in return for food, drink, clothing, board and, more exceptionally, monetary wages. This was typically part of the life-cycle, with young men and women working in service for a number of years between their mid-teens and mid-twenties. According to Goldberg, De Moor and van Zanden, the increasing demand for this life-cycle service during the post-Black Death period,
most of which was concentrated in urban areas, allowed girls to break free from parental control, put off marriage and acquire the means to independently set up a household of their own and/or the experience to move on to more rewarding occupations.83 The alien subsidy returns provide a few cases that could be interpreted as such success stories, mostly among women from the Low Countries and Germany dwelling in urban centres. The ‘Teutonic’ Margaret Halle, for example, worked as a servant for Marcellus Maures, a goldsmith from Utrecht and supplier to the English court, in London in 1483. She was married to Sampson Halle, another of Maures’s employees and a fellow national of hers.84 Also in 1483, the ‘Teutonic’ Katherine Wight was a servant of John Evynger, one of the most successful alien brewers in the capital, and was married to her compatriot Jacobus Wight, a co-worker in the Evynger household.85 The Halles and Wights may have married while working in London, capitalising on their newly-obtained independence, but may also have migrated to England as married couples.

Most of the evidence from the alien subsidies, however, gives no indication of economic betterment. By far the most numerous group among the female alien servants were the Scots, whose experiences were discussed by Bennett.86 They were responsible for 293 entries in the records, or 59 per cent of all instances in which immigrant women working in service were listed with a nationality between 1440 and 1487. All but some of these Scottish women in service were recorded in the northern counties of Cumberland, Northumberland, Westmorland and Yorkshire, a part of the country which, during the 1440s, was struck by an agrarian crisis and would not have offered the most attractive opportunities.87 In 121 of the 293 cases in which they were listed (41 per cent), they were said to have left in the time between the redaction of the tax lists and the collection of the tax, indicating that they had to move around in order to earn a living. This was the case in only 92 of the 468 instances in which Scottish men working in service were recorded (20 per cent). In addition to the Scottish women
listed as servants, twenty-four were recorded as ‘vagabonds’, a morally derogative term that explicitly denoted the absence of a fixed residence and employment, (as opposed to only thirteen Scottish men).  

Drawing on the alien subsidy data, it is hard to see how the work of these women in service could have been a platform for their economic or social ascendance. Only one Scottish woman, the aforementioned weaver Marion Scot, was ever recorded with a non-service occupation, whereas dozens of Scottish men were listed working as tailors, husbandmen, souters and weavers. In less than 1 per cent of the instances in which Scottish female servants or vagabonds were listed and 15 per cent of all cases in which Scottish women were recorded (so including those who could, theoretically, have worked in service in an earlier stage) were they said to be householders, as opposed to over 1 per cent among Scottish male servants or vagabonds and 35 per cent among all Scottish men (again leaving out married couples). In only 2 per cent of the cases in which Scottish female servants and vagabonds were enumerated and 11 per cent of all instances in which Scottish women were listed were they recorded as being married.

The same is true, to a lesser extent, for the French female servants, who represented 10 per cent of all immigrant women working in service whose nationalities were listed in the alien subsidies. Of the fifty French women recorded as servants, thirteen (or 26 per cent) were said to have moved and four (or 8 per cent) to have died by the time the tax had to be paid. In the 1456 return for Evershot (Dorset), the entry for the French Joan Savage, who, at the time of the assessment, was still employed by an Englishman, was crossed out with a note added that she had left the country again. The much more numerous French men working in service were reported as having moved in 193 out of 1,052 cases (18 per cent) and in seven as deceased (0.7 per cent). No French woman was ever recorded in the alien subsidy returns with an occupation other than servant or labourer. In none of the cases in which French female servants were listed
and 14 per cent of all instances in which French women were enumerated were they categorised as householders, compared to 2 per cent among male French servants and 37 per cent among all French men (including unmarried immigrants only). In only one of the instances in which French servant women were enumerated and 14 per cent of all cases in which French women were listed were they said to be married.91

Judged by the economic and social aspirations of English life-cycle servants, most female immigrants working in service in fifteenth-century England were, thus, not very successful. The question is, however, whether foreign-born women in the country had the same economic expectations as their English colleagues. To consider the absence of evidence of female immigrant servants setting up independent households and moving on to other occupations in England as a failure of some sorts, is predicated on the assumption that these women had the ambition to permanently settle abroad. But did they? For immigrants from more economically deprived areas, which may have included many of the female Scottish servants, migration to England may have been a matter of desperation, rather than aspiration, aimed merely at short-term survival. Others may have come over with the intention of gaining experience and developing their livelihoods abroad for only parts of their lives, before returning home and capitalising on these assets.92 If so, the alien subsidy returns provide us with the earliest traces of life-cycle service on a transnational scale, something which, so far, has only been documented systematically for later periods.93 This would also place the mobility of women, who were disproportionately represented among alien servants in England, in a fresh perspective. Women may have been less inclined to migrate over longer distances than men, as Ravenstein argued, but those who did may have been more likely to remain internationally mobile than their male counterparts. Unfortunately, the alien subsidy returns cover only the experiences of immigrant men and women in England. Further research, exploiting the available documentary material in aliens’ regions of origin, will have to point out to what extent
these immigrants returned to their homelands and were able to build up successful lives and careers back home.

**Conclusion**

For the methodological difficulties they pose, the records of the alien subsidies tell a lot about the relationship between immigration, gender and economic opportunity in England during the later Middle Ages. They make clear that very few female immigrants in the country were employed in independent occupations during the second half of the fifteenth century. The opportunities for male immigrants in this respect were significantly better, possibly a reason why men moved to England in higher numbers than women. Where comparison is possible, the figures also suggest that English women had better access to these jobs than their alien counterparts. When it comes to employment in independent occupations, female immigrants thus seem to have experienced a medieval equivalent of the ‘double disadvantage’, facing the adverse effects of both their gender and origins. The alien subsidy returns also provide fewer instances of immigrant women performing these jobs than of female aliens that could be linked to the low-status prostitution sector. This is, again, very different for immigrant men, for whom connections to sex work were very hard to find. The vast majority of female immigrants recorded in the alien subsidy rolls worked as servants. They were also more likely to be employed in this line of work than immigrant men and, as far as the records can tell, English women. The alien subsidies provide very little evidence that female aliens in service worked their way up economically or socially during their stay in the country.

Our overall assessment of the economic opportunities for immigrant women in fifteenth-century England should, however, depend on the wider context of these English experiences, those of female alien servants in particular. If we assume that the alien subsidy returns tell the whole story, and England was the endpoint of these women’s peregrinations,
then their perspectives were, indeed, very limited, offering little or no chance of economic betterment. If, by contrast, we take into account that the evidence from the alien subsidies could show only a stage in a career continued in other parts of Europe, with the experience and other assets gained in England opening doors to better conditions back home, then women during the later Middle Ages, or at least some of them, may have experienced something of a ‘golden age’ after all, enjoying opportunities for transnational professional mobility and economic betterment undocumented during any previous period in history.

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2 Employment Rates for the Population Aged 20-64, by Country of Birth and by Sex, 2017 (%) MII18, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Employment_rates_for_the_population_aged_20-64,_by_country_of_birth_and_by_sex,_2017_(%25)_MII18.png (accessed 11 February 2019). Foreign-born refers to those born in another state, including both other EU and non-EU states. In some individual EU states, such as the UK, the immigration of highly-educated immigrants from other EU states resulted in a higher employment rate among foreign-born than among native-born men.


7 See, for example, Pamela Sharpe (ed.), *Women, Gender and Labour Migration: Historical and Global Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2001) and some of the essays in this issue.


12 ‘England’s Immigrants, 1330-1550’ database, www.englandsimmigrants.com (accessed 12 February 2019). Drawing on the alien subsidy returns, the first monograph on immigration in


18 The figure refers to instances in which people were recorded in the alien subsidy returns between 1440 and 1487, possibly multiple times, and not to unique individual taxpayers. Because people were often listed with conflicting or missing details, it is impossible to say how many unique individuals this represents.


20 The National Archives (hereafter TNA), E 179/242/25, m. 10d.

21 Francesco Guidi-Bruscoli and Jessica Lutkin, ‘Perception, Identity and Culture: The Italian Communities in Fifteenth-Century London and Southampton Revisited’, in Ormrod,

22 TNA, E 179/242/25.

23 TNA, E 179/184/212.


28 TNA, E 179/184/212.

29 Goldberg, Women, Work, and Life-Cycle, pp. 104-150.

30 TNA, E 179/95/100, rot. 5d; E 179/113/107, m. 2; E 179/217/59, m. 7; E 179/235/8, m. 2; E 179/270/31, m. 8.

31 TNA, E 179/242/25, m. 7d; E 179/270/31, m. 8.

32 TNA, E 179/184/212, rot. 12.
33 TNA, E 179/180/111, rot. 4; E 179/180/111, rot. 6, m. 1d.


35 TNA, E 179/242/25, m. 10.

36 TNA, E 179/195/33, m. 2; E 179/158/115, m. 2; E 179/184/212, rot. 10.

37 TNA, E 179/113/104, m. 4; E 179/149/177, m. 2.


40 TNA, E 179/108/130, mm. 2-3; E 179/113/103, Part 2; E 179/113/104; E 179/141/69; E 179/202/114, m. 3; E 179/235/67; E 179/242/25.

41 TNA, E 179/113/103, Part 2, m. 8.

42 TNA, E 179/242/25, m. 9.

43 TNA, E 179/124/154, m. 2; E 179/144/52, m. 19; E 179/144/67-70; E 179/144/72; E 179/235/58, m. 1; E 179/236/74; E 179/236/96; E 179/236/107; E 179/242/25.

44 TNA, E 179/180/111, rot. 4; E 179/180/111, rot. 6, m. 1d.

45 TNA, E 179/242/25, m. 10; E 179/270/31, m. 8.


TNA, SC 8/277/13823.


See, for example, the letters of denization granted to William Spencer and his wife Idonia, natives of Cologne, in 1461. CPR: Edward IV, 1461-1467 (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1897), p. 7.

Because their husbands were automatically assessed as householders paying for the entire family, it is impossible to establish their fiscal status, see supra.


Bennett, ‘Medieval Women, Modern Women’.


65 Norfolk Record Office, Y/C 4/105, annex to m. 6v. For the use of the striped hood, see Karras, *Common Women*, p. 22.

66 Liddy and Lambert, ‘Civic Franchise’, p. 131 n. 38.


70 Norfolk Record Office, Y/C 4, 143, m. 13; TNA, E 179/149/126, m. 5.
Women were listed with the surname ‘Frow(e)’ on thirty-two occasions, but this includes cases in which the same persons were recorded multiple times. TNA, E 179/108/113, mm. 5-6; E 179/124/107, rot. 6d; E 179/124/138, rot. 1; E 179/141/84, m. 2; E 179/144/42, mm. 14-16, 22-3; E 179/144/50, mm. 4, 19; E 179/144/52, mm. 6, 9, 23, 25; E 179/144/53, mm. 5, 14; E 179/144/54, mm. 1, 4, 13; E 179/144/64, m. 7; E 179/144/68-9, 72; E 179/184/212, rot. 3d; E 179/235/23, m. 1; E 179/236/74; E 179/242/9, rot. 1d.


TNA, E 179/184/212, rot. 13.

TNA, E 179/136/206.

Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life-Cycle*, pp. 149-57. The exception is Southwark, where seven married couples operating stews, their twelve male and seventeen female servants and twelve women householders who probably worked independently as prostitutes were listed in the 1381 poll tax return. Carlin, *Medieval Southwark*, p. 212.


For Batyn, see TNA, E 179/113/104, m. 7; E 179/113/103 Part 2, m. 5. For Cok, see Maryanne Kowaleski, ‘The Assimilation of Foreigners in Late Medieval Exeter: A Prospopographical Analysis’, in Ormrod, McDonald and Taylor (eds), *Resident Aliens*, pp. 175-7.

TNA, E 179/242/25, m. 11.

82 Goldberg, ‘What Was a Servant?’.

83 De Moor and van Zanden, ‘Girl Power’.

84 TNA, E 179/242/25, m. 9d.

85 TNA, E 179/242/25, m. 7d.

86 Bennett, ‘Women (and Men) on the Move’. The figures in this paragraph, covering the period between 1440 and 1487, are my own, based on the data from the ‘England’s Immigrants, 1330-1550’ database (accessed 12 February 2019). Bennett focused only on 1440, but her conclusions do not differ fundamentally from mine.


88 Listed in 32 instances, ‘vagabond’ is the third most frequently recorded female ‘occupation’ in the alien subsidy returns, responsible for over 2 per cent of all cases in which occupations were recorded.

89 All four deceased women were recorded in Kent in 1440: TNA, E 179/124/107, rot. 4d, 5, 5d. Rather than French female servants being particularly unfortunate in this county, it is more likely that they, too, had moved and the local tax collector reported them dead to justify the absence of a payment.

90 Dorset History Centre, D/WLC/X1, rot. 4.

91 TNA, E 179/124/138, rot. 2d.

92 During this period, real wages in England were higher than in most surrounding regions. John H. Munro, ‘Urban Wage Structures in Late-Medieval England and the Low Countries: Work-Time and Seasonal Wages’, in Ian Blanchard (ed.), *Labour and Leisure in Historical Perspective, Thirteenth to Twentieth Centuries* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1994), pp. 65-78.
See, for example, Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux (ed.), *Domestic Service and the Formation of European Identity: Understanding the Globalization of Domestic Work, 16th-21st Centuries* (Bern: Lang, 2004).