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MAIDENHOOD AS THE PERFECT AGE OF WOMAN'S LIFE

Kim M. Phillips

In the medieval pantheon of saints an exalted position is reserved for a group of saintly women who might best be described as maidenly.¹ They are maidenly, that is, in many of the senses which the word implies. They are young, yet they are not children. They are beautiful (and the focus of male desire), yet are virgins, untouched by the episodes of marriage, sex and motherhood which mark the lives and bodies of adult women.² These are the virgin martyrs, whose popularity was at its height in late-medieval English culture.³ Their popularity, their virginity, their potential as positive role models both for women and men, even their potentially pornographic function, have been remarked upon.⁴ What has not, to my knowledge, attracted much interest is the life-cycle stage which these young women saints occupy. Here I shall argue that, firstly, they are all young women in the 'maidenhood' phase of their life cycle – that is, the transitional phase between childhood and fully fledged adulthood – and secondly, that they help to demonstrate that this life-cycle phase is a strong contender for the title of the 'perfect age of woman's life'.

It is not only the virgin martyrs who stand out as representative of this life-cycle phase, and also as support for the contention that it is maidenhood which, in certain discourses, represents the perfect age of woman's life. Late-medieval English representations of the Blessed Virgin Mary at her assumption and coronation, both in visual and textual sources, frequently depict a 'maidenly' figure. That is, a tender, delicate young woman of marriageable age.⁵ Such images of the woman who held the highest place of any female figure add significantly to the suggestion that maidenhood as a life-cycle phase held a special place in late-medieval English ideals of femininity. A third and final example, this one from secular literature, also supports this point of view. The figure who has become known as the 'Pearl Maiden', from the late fourteenth-century poem which has been given the same name, may also be said to occupy the maidenhood phase of her life.⁶ The significance of her change of age in death – from infant to, I suggest, 'maiden' – holds an important clue to the puzzle of what may have constituted the perfect age of woman's life. In death, as bride of Christ, she exists in the body of a youthful, sexually mature yet virginal young woman. She has reached the peak of her femininity.

This essay will explore these contentions through a number of stages. First, through discussion of the medieval literary, philosophical and iconographic

model of the 'ages of man', and of the view of many commentators that it is *iuventus*, or middle age, which represented the perfect age of man. Their discussions, with one honourable exception, generally leave unexamined the question of whether the ages of man also constituted the ages of woman, and whether therefore middle age represented the perfect age of woman's life. This question, rarely asked and not yet answered, is explored within the remainder of the essay. The notion that 'maidenhood' existed as a distinct phase in women's life cycle is discussed briefly, before the three examples described above are examined. Maidenhood emerges as a strong candidate for the age which represented the perfected state of femininity. Let it not be thought, however, that other discourses did not present other points of view. In those, wifehood, or motherhood, or perhaps even widowhood, represented alternative ideals of femininity. What is suggested here is that maidenhood stands specifically as a corollary to the perfect age of man within the elite discourses which constituted the ages of man literature and the theology of bodily resurrection. The kinds of interests which directed those discourses (male, elite and often clerical) seem to have viewed maidenhood as representing the peak of femininity, within the English culture of the late-thirteenth to the end of the fifteenth centuries.

THE 'AGES OF MAN', THE 'AGES OF WOMAN'?

As many scholars of medieval literature, art, philosophy and science have noted, the theme of the 'ages of man', marking and describing the different characteristics of each life-cycle stage, was a popular motif within such disciplines.⁷ Many versions of this topos existed, though with broadly similar outlines. Some describe three main phases in the life cycle of man, others four, still others five, six or seven, from birth to death. While the names for the different stages varied from scheme to scheme, and the complexity of the schemes differed one from another, each broadly mapped out a life cycle of man similar to Aristotle's conception of life as a curve, from *augmentum* to *status* to *decrementum*. 'Every thing generated must grow, maintain itself and then decay' he wrote, and associated this cycle with the stages of human life.⁸

For Aristotle, and for late-medieval writers who took up this theme, the middle stage represented the peak, the prime, the *acme* of a man's life.⁹ This middle age, sometimes identified with *iuventus*, sometimes *maturitas* depending on the nomenclature employed in a particular age scheme, was held up by many medieval authors as the age at which a man reached a perfect balance of physical strength and mental powers.¹⁰ This prime or peak age has a variable span in years, depending on the individual account, but in general covers the years ranging from a man's mid-twenties to his mid-forties.

Though each of the major commentators on the ages of man scheme notes that this middle age represents a peak in the idealized life cycle, only Mary

Dove's account takes this theme as its focus. More importantly for this study, it is only Dove's account which notes a firmly gendered element to the theme. Where Burrow includes feminine figures such as the Pearl Maiden, Emily of 'The Knight's Tale' and St Agnes as illustrative of points of his discussion,¹¹ and Sears makes little of possible differences in conceptions of the ages of man and of woman,¹² Dove notices that authors who illustrate the ages of man theme are not particularly interested in what might constitute the ages of woman. '(W)e need to remind ourselves that "man" in the Ages of Man is not normally an inclusive term, and that when I talk about "man's life" I am not being inclusive, either'.¹³ Dove, along with Sears and Burrow, does note that a handful of literary and visual representations of the ages scheme used feminine imagery. Notable examples of this include the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum*, where in some of the Middle English versions the four seasons are described by analogy with a woman's life, and Dante's *Il Convivio*, where the ages of the soul are also described using feminine imagery.¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that it is not woman's life as such which is being described in these instances, but rather the seasons and the soul. The use of feminine imagery in Dante's poem may have been influenced by the grammatical gender of the concept described, rather than by a sense of the importance of mapping the stages of a woman's life. Certainly, these few exceptions to the rule are not sufficient to constitute a complete tradition on the 'ages of woman'. This essay thus picks up Dove's term 'perfect age', and the question which her study does not have space to address: what constituted the perfect age of woman's life?¹⁵

A similar question is opened up, though inadvertently, by those who have examined the idea of the perfect age of the body in the theology of the resurrection. Medieval commentators from St Augustine, through Ælfric to Peter Lombard were fascinated by the question of the form of the body at the resurrection, and wondered what age the body would possess in this final, perfected form.¹⁶ They took inspiration from St Paul's words in Ephesians, 'until we all meet into the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fulness of Christ'.¹⁷ The passage seems often to have been interpreted in literal fashion and these commentators argued that the body at the resurrection, which would be the perfect body, would take on the perfect age of Christ. Some, such as Augustine held that this would be thirty, as that was the age at which Christ began his ministry. Others, including Ælfric and Peter Lombard, argued that it would be thirty-two or three, as this was the age of Christ at his crucifixion. Either way, the perfect age of Christ, and therefore the age of the human body at resurrection, fell neatly within the 'prime' age within the ages of man scheme.

But neither the medieval commentators nor their modern historians have addressed the question of whether women, as well as men, would be resurrected in 'the age of the fulness of Christ', that is, in a 30- or 33-year-old body. Here I

shall argue that the Pearl Maiden, the virgin martyrs, and the Virgin Mary at her assumption and coronation, all represented in later medieval English visual and textual imagery in the bodies which they would possess in heaven, are depicted within the 'maidenhood' phase of their life cycle, and that this indicates that for some interested parties maidenhood represented the 'perfect age of woman's life'.

MAIDENHOOD

One cannot begin to examine the question of what constituted the perfect age of woman until one has a sense of the stages which were perceived to make up a woman's life. As the ages of man scheme seems largely uninterested in women, it is not valid simply to apply the stages named there, such as *puericia*, *adolescencia*, *iuventus*, *senectus* and so on, and to associate the qualities linked to the different stages of a man's life to a woman's life. Sketching an alternative scheme to the ages of man for women is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is important to note here that late-medieval English culture did recognize a phase in young women's life cycle intervening between childhood and fully fledged adulthood.¹⁸

The beginning and end points of this phase are blurry, and it would be rather artificial to set them too precisely. However, it seems reasonable to state that this stage was perceived to begin in a young woman's early to mid-teens, and to end sometime between her late teens and mid-twenties. Medieval canon law set a girl's age of consent at twelve (while for boys it was fourteen), arguing that at that age she became sufficiently physically developed to engage in procreation, and sufficiently intellectually and morally developed to understand the nature of the bond into which she was entering.¹⁹ It does not seem possible to determine the age at which girls reached physical maturity in practice, but medical and scientific literature traditionally placed a girl's age at menarche at between twelve and fifteen.²⁰ Common and borough legal traditions placed women's age at majority (i.e., at which they could leave wardship), and also their age of criminal and civil responsibility, within an age range in the middle teens.²¹ All these markers of development indicate a belief that women moved from the incapacities and physical immaturity of childhood into a state more closely resembling adult womanhood in the early to mid-teens.

That they did not usually, however, accomplish full transition to adulthood at this stage is suggested by a number of factors. Marriage for English girls in the later Middle Ages did not usually take place soon after legal age of puberty, but more often some time from the later teens to mid-twenties.²² While marriage soon after or even before canonical age did occur for some girls of the gentry class and higher, this does not seem to have been the norm. Even where such early marriage did occur, anxieties expressed about the youth of the girls concerned indicates that early marriage does not necessarily indicate the absence of a notion of a phase intervening between childhood and adulthood for girls, but

rather that family, political or economic interests could sometimes override that notion.²³ In addition to the evidence on age of marriage or consummation of marriage, the existence of the institution of service and its association particularly with young single women in their mid-teens to mid-twenties indicates that this life-cycle phase was recognized and accommodated within English culture.²⁴

Some might label this phase 'female adolescence', and while I do not have an especially strong quarrel with the use of the phrase, I do not feel it is the most useful term available.²⁵ My preference is for 'maidenhood', as 'maiden' is the term more commonly used in the England of the late thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to refer to young unmarried women than, say, the Latin *adolescens*.²⁶ Moreover, it usefully points to two key aspects of the identity of the woman at this stage: she is both young, and virginal.²⁷ The medieval maiden, therefore, is a woman past childhood but not yet a fully fledged adult, and one whose identity is bound to a certain tension. That is, she is at once sexually and psychologically mature (as the legal codes recognize), but she must also hold onto the virginity required by her pre-marital state. This tension, between sexual maturity and chastity, is the key to the identity of the maiden in late-medieval English culture. I shall argue here that this tension, though in other contexts problematic, could act as a focus for desire. The at-once sexual and chaste maiden was an object of desire for certain groups, and thus she could represent an ideal state of femininity.

PARAGONS OF FEMININITY

When Paul imagined Corinthian confusion on the subject of the bodies of the resurrected, 'With what manner of body shall they come?', he may or may not have had gender distinctions in mind. But we may pose the same question on more specific grounds: 'With what manner of body shall the women come?' By what bodies might the souls of saved women be known? Three examples from late-medieval English culture may give us some idea: the Virgin Mary, who by her assumption was transferred in her body direct from death to Christ's side in heaven;²⁸ the virgin martyrs, who in achieving sanctity were able to bypass the purgatory reserved for ordinary sinners and go straight to Christ; and the Pearl Maiden, who is also seen to have bypassed purgatory in her innocence, and is shown on her way to join her bridegroom in the Heavenly City. Do these female figures receive representation in the bodies of 30- or 33-year-old women?

Several commentators have linked the Pearl Maiden's physical state to the theology of the resurrection.²⁹ The poet could not represent her strictly speaking in resurrected form, as that would imply that the raising from the dead had already occurred, but still 'it is appropriate that this body should have the appearance of the one which, according to the highest patristic authority, she will assume after the General Resurrection'.³⁰ What no critic seems to have taken into

account is that the Pearl Maiden is not represented in the body of a woman in her mid-thirties. While her age is not stated, it may be deduced from her representation, as will be discussed below. Her age might also be suggested by comparison with Boccaccio's *Olympia*. This poem bears a striking similarity to *Pearl*, in that it is a dream vision in which a father sees and speaks to his daughter, who had died at five-and-a-half but appears to her father as a girl of marriageable age.³¹ Thirty or thirty-three was *not* the most desirable marriageable age for women, particularly in Tuscany. We might expect her to appear, rather, in the body of a young woman in her late teens.³²

Pearl describes a dream vision, in which a male speaker is confronted by a vision of his daughter, his 'pearl', who had died at the age of two, but who appears to him as a beautiful and courtly young woman: a 'maiden', as he calls her.³³ The Pearl Maiden is interesting to me because she has two ages: she is a 'faunt' (161) or small child, but in death she has taken on the body of a 'maiden of menske' (162), or 'damyselle' (361). Her physical appearance is described at length (197-228). Her dress is in the style of a fashionable young woman of the late fourteenth century, and her dress is all white and covered in pearls (197-204).³⁴ Her skin is the purest white – whiter than whale bone, or passing the fleur de lys (212, 753). She wears a crown of pearls and flowers: 'A pyȝt coroune ȝet wer þat gyrlē/ Of marjorys and non oþer ston,/ Hiȝe pynakled of cler quyt perle,/ Wyth flurtd flowrez perfet vpon' ('That girl also wore a decorated crown of pearls and no other stone, with high pinnacles of clear white pearl, with perfect flowers figured on it') (205-8). Her hair is golden and hangs unbound around her face and on her shoulders: 'As schorne golde schyr her fax þenne schon,/ On schyldereȝ þat leghe vnlapped lyȝte' ('her hair, that lay lightly on her shoulders, unbound, then shone like bright cut gold') (213-14). She has grey eyes, and likens herself to a rose (254, 269). The dreamer marvels at her 'fayre figure' and dazzling beauty (747-53).

These physical characteristics – white skin, long loose golden hair, grey eyes, the likeness to a rose, marvellous beauty and fairness of figure – are all aspects of the courtly ideal of feminine beauty, which can be found in almost any youthful heroine of late-medieval English romance or courtly lyric, and will be examined in a moment. That the Pearl Maiden's appearance is meant to represent her physical state on entering heaven is made clear near the end of the poem when she joins a procession of a hundred thousand 'vergynez', all, as she is, crowned, dressed in white and covered with pearls, and goes in with this merry band to meet their bridegroom (1095-152). At that moment her childish age – a mere two years old – and her maidenly body seem combined, as the dreamer is moved to see his 'lyttel quene', making merry with her friends (1147-50). Her childish state is symbolic of her innocence, as is made clear during her debate with the dreamer over the parable of the vineyard (481-660), but she appears in a young woman's body.

There are three elements of her representation which she shares with the iconography of the virgin martyrs and the Virgin Mary at assumption and coronation, and which indicate that she was meant to be imagined as a maiden rather than an older woman. Those elements are her courtly beauty, her loose golden hair, and her crown. The conventions concerning feminine beauty were remarkably consistent in the period under discussion. The beautiful woman almost always, in both literary and visual media, has long golden hair, very fair skin, fine features, sparkling eyes, curved dark eyebrows, red lips, and a long and slender body with small breasts but a protruding belly. She often has grey eyes, though at other times they are blue, a cleft chin, and delicately rosy cheeks.³⁵ Matthew of Vendôme and Geoffrey of Vinsauf supply sample descriptions of the beautiful woman in their guides to poetical writing,³⁶ and the convention is also prominent within romances and lyrics.³⁷ A key aspect of the feminine ideal is her slenderness and delicacy:

Let the upper arms, as long as they are slender, be enchanting. Let the fingers be soft and slim in substance, smooth and milk-white in appearance, long and straight in shape . . . Let the snowy bosom present both breasts like virginal gems set side by side. Let the waist be slim, a mere handful . . . let the leg show itself graceful; let the remarkably dainty foot wanton with its own daintiness.³⁸

This description strongly implies that beauty was associated with the slenderness of youth and virginity.

For my purposes it is most significant that youthfulness was a key element of this ubiquitous ideal of feminine beauty. The ages of some Middle English literary heroines who are described as beautiful are stated, and they are always in their teens. Freine is twelve when men begin to notice her beauty, and Goldboru, 'the fairest wuman on live' is an heiress waiting to come of age.³⁹ Chaucer's Alison, whose beauty is conventional yet slightly satirized, is eighteen, and his Virginia – a 'mayde of excellent beauty' who is described in conventional terms – is fourteen.⁴⁰ Where the age of the beautiful woman is not stated, her youth is implicit in her figure, with its slender limbs, small high breasts, narrow waist and smooth white skin. An ugly woman, in contrast, is often old, with loose skin, a forest of wrinkles and breasts like deflated bladders.⁴¹

Some of those who have discussed the subject of beauty in history have argued that feminine beauty is ahistorical, eternal and unchanging.⁴² Authors such as Kenneth Clark and Arthur Marwick seem profoundly unaware of their own subjectivities as white, middle class or higher, heterosexual males of the mid- or later twentieth century, and the effect of such subjectivities on their interpretations.⁴³ Others have argued that tastes have altered across time, and that representations of women must be read within their cultural and political contexts. For example, Anne Hollander argues that the notions of physical beauty

present in any given period depend on the fashions of the day, as bodies represented in visual form can be said to have been shaped by the 'ghosts' of their clothing.⁴⁴ Margaret Miles discusses the appeal of the Virgin's naked breast, and argues that the attraction lay in the breast's association with food and nurture in a time of threatened nutrition (the mid-fourteenth century).⁴⁵ Similarly, the representation of the idealized beautiful woman as a slender teenage girl should not be seen as a constant across history or cultures. It should be read within the historical context of its production. I see this ideal as an aspect of the wider ideal of maidenhood as the age of consummate femininity.

The conventional beauty of the Pearl Maiden is one aspect of her representation as a youthful, idealized maiden. Her hair is another aspect. It is golden, long, and hangs loose on her shoulders.⁴⁶ Such hair is an element of conventional beauty, but it stands for more than that. Long, uncovered and loose hair had a variety of meanings in late-medieval English culture. It could be a sign of uncivilized or anti-social nature, as it is in the images of the hairy wild men and women who sometimes appear in manuscript illuminations.⁴⁷ That sign of wildness could be combined with loose hair as a sign of penitence, as it was in the *vitae* and visual representations of Mary Magdalene in the desert and Mary of Egypt.⁴⁸ Hair long enough to cover the body could provide modesty, as it does in the life of St Agnes, whose hair grows to cover her nakedness when she is stripped and thrown into a brothel, and in the legend of Lady Godiva.⁴⁹

Perhaps paradoxically, long, loose hair was also a sign of sexual attractiveness and availability, and it was for this reason that early Christian writers demanded that a woman hide her hair under a veil.⁵⁰ The London *Liber Albus* required that the cutting of a prostitute's hair be one aspect of her punishment on a third conviction, and thus of the taming of her sexuality.⁵¹ For professed virgins of the Middle Ages, 'taking the veil' was an event within the ritual of consecration, along with the adoption of monastic clothes and the ring by which they were wed to Christ.⁵² This ceremony was ritually linked with the secular wedding ceremony, during which a bride would often wear her hair loose and uncovered, and would signal her movement from maidenhood to wifedom by tying up her hair and covering it with a headdress or wimple.⁵³ While young unmarried women may have often worn their hair bound or covered in practice, as is indicated in some illustrations and tomb brasses, loose uncovered hair remained an instantly recognizable symbol of the state of virginity. Loose hair also played a symbolic role in the coronation of queens – a ritual which bears many similarities to the rituals of consecration and marriage – and was probably meant as a sign of their chastity.⁵⁴

Loose unbound hair signified an apparently contradictory state: the state of sexual attractiveness and availability, and the state of virginity. It therefore stands as the sign *par excellence* of maidenhood, an age in which sexual desirability and the fact of virginity are intermingled. There is a tension, rather than a

contradiction within the state of maidenhood. Sexuality and chastity there exist simultaneously. The unbound golden hair of the Pearl Maiden is meant as a sign that she is not meant to be imagined as a sober, respectable woman in her mid-thirties, but rather as a perfectly chaste and gloriously desirable maiden, of an age probably somewhere in her mid- or late teens.

The crown of pearls and flowers which the Maiden wears is another key to her maidenly state. The author of the thirteenth-century exhortation to chastity, *Hali Meïðhad*, was stating little more than was conventional in his image of virgins in heaven. They all wear 'a circlet shining brighter than the sun, called *aureola* in Latin'.⁵⁵ The crown may stand as a symbol of spinsterhood, and thus of permanent virginity in the secular life, as it does in *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage*: 'Yfe þou wylt no hosbonde have, but wher thy mayden croun',⁵⁶ or of the permanent virginity of the woman professed to the religious life: 'Your virginity . . . will be radiant in a golden diadem'.⁵⁷ The crown or circlet is an ancient and extremely widespread symbol, whose origins cannot be established here. Suffice to say that its primary modern association, with royalty, was not its first meaning. It is possible that its later medieval associations with virginity derived from two separate traditions: one of the circlet, crown or wreath as a symbol of marriage, and the other as a symbol of victory.

The crown as both a religious and secular symbol of victory and triumph in the Middle Ages seems derived from the Greek and Roman wreath, which symbolized the victory of athletes and of military leaders, and became part of the imperial regalia.⁵⁸ The symbol passed into Christian religious use before secular, with its adoption as a symbol of victory over death, particularly for martyrs.⁵⁹ Coronation became part of royal inauguration in the West in ninth-century Carolingian rituals, and Hincmar of Rheims in the second half of the ninth century was instrumental in the development of the symbolic association of crowns with king-making.⁶⁰ The wreath of flowers as a symbol of marriage is, if anything, of much older and more obscure origin, and is perhaps associated primarily with fertility.⁶¹ The association of flower garlands with fertility perhaps persisted in the later Middle Ages with May Day games, which involved gathering flowers and crowning of a May King and Queen, as well as with the custom of brides wearing garlands or circlets on their wedding day.⁶²

The crown of virgins may have been linked to both traditions. It symbolised victory over death through the promise of eternal life, and it signified virginity through its association with marriage and fertility, and thus through the image of the virgin as the bride of Christ.⁶³ The Pearl Maiden's crown consists of both flowers and pearls. The latter were a well-established symbol of purity and virginity by the later Middle Ages, a symbol played upon by Jacobus de Voragine in his introduction to the life of St Margaret, as the Latin for pearl is *margarita*.⁶⁴ The Maiden's white garments also contribute to her representation as pure, innocent and virginal. White garments were associated with both the innocence

of the child undergoing baptism, and professed virginity.⁶⁵ To sum up, the pearls, the crown, the loose hair and the white garments combine with the Pearl Maiden's conventional beauty to present a complex yet harmonious image of a woman who combines most admirable feminine traits: chastity, and sexual desirability.

Her appearance in many ways matches that of the virgin martyrs. The virgin martyrs, who were the most popular type of female saint in late-medieval England, include SS Katherine, Margaret, Lucy, Christina, Cecilia, Dorothy, Agnes, Barbara and Agatha.⁶⁶ Their *vitae* show individual variants, but have several main themes in common. The maiden is usually of noble and wealthy background, and is Christian in a predominantly pagan late-classical world. Upon reaching puberty her extraordinary natural beauty becomes apparent, and she is sought after by a powerful pagan suitor. Having pledged both faith and virginity to God, she rejects the advances of the pagan suitor, and is thrown into prison. She undergoes a series of horrible tortures, designed to make her renounce both faith and chastity, but refuses to give up either. Finally she is martyred, usually by beheading. While the virgin martyrs have received increasing attention from scholars in recent years, their age has been little mentioned. I see this, however, as central to their identity as ideal representations of womanhood.

Of those whose actual ages are given in their lives all are in their teens: Agnes is thirteen, Margaret is fifteen, Katherine is eighteen, and Christina is twelve when her torments begin, though she is tortured for fifteen years before her eventual martyrdom.⁶⁷ Though we are not told the ages of the others, it seems clear that they too occupy this age of post-pubertal youthful virginity. They must all be of *aetas nobiles* – the legal or actual age of puberty and capacity to marry – because the plot of each virgin martyr's life hinges on her sexual attractiveness and the efforts of her suitor/tormentor to make her marry him. We are not, therefore, dealing with child saints. The upper limit of their age may also be suggested by their eligibility – they are not spinster saints who have gone beyond the expected age of marriage – and also by the language used to describe them. In the Middle English of Osbern Bokenham's collection they are called 'maidens', and the corresponding Latin term in the *Legenda Aurea* is *puella*, not a term likely to be used of a mature woman.⁶⁸ Moreover, the lives frequently describe the martyrs as 'young' or of 'tender age', or as *tenerae puellae* – tender girls. Lucy is 'a maydyn yung and delycate',⁶⁹ Agatha is a 'damysel ying',⁷⁰ Faith is 'in hir tendir age'.⁷¹ There can be little doubt that all the virgin martyrs would have been perceived to be young women occupying the maidenhood stage of their life cycle.

According to medieval authors on the resurrection, Christ died at thirty-three because he had reached the peak of his life, and it would not have been appropriate for Christ to experience physical decline.⁷² Is it possible that the

virgin martyrs died in their teens because that was the peak of the lives of their feminine bodies? It seems relevant to note that, in regard to healthy reproduction, Aristotle had argued that the perfect age for women at marriage was eighteen, while for men it was thirty-six, and Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum* kept Aristotle's perfect age for women, though it lowered that of men.⁷³ The idea that a woman's later teenage years represented a feminine physical ideal went beyond natural philosophy and eugenics, and entered the widely disseminated representations of women saints.

The late-medieval rewriting of the life of St Apollonia may be singled out as illustrative of my theory that youthfulness is a key attribute of feminine perfection. In earlier lives, including the thirteenth-century *Legenda Aurea*, she is an aging deaconess, whom Jacobus de Voragine calls 'an admirable virgin, well along in years'.⁷⁴ But by the later Middle Ages in England she is represented visually as a young maiden, alongside youthful martyrs such as Agnes.⁷⁵ Increasingly, youth was becoming a necessary element of ideal femininity.

The virgin martyrs do not generally wear the white clothes of the Pearl Maiden, but in visual representations they all share her conventional beauty, her long, loose, golden hair, and, in many cases, her crown or garland.⁷⁶ Bokenham's description of the beauty of Margaret when first seen by the prefect Olibrius is particularly notable for its engagement with courtly ideals of feminine beauty:

And whan he sey hyr forheed lely-whyht,
Hyr bent browys blake, & hyr grey eyne,
Hyr chyry Chekys, hyr nose streyt & ryht,
Hyr lypys rody, hyr chyn, wych as pleyne
Pulshyd marbyl shoon, & clovyn in tweyne.⁷⁷

This matches perfectly the courtly literary ideal of feminine beauty described above. It seems apparent from Bokenham's allusions to both Geoffrey of Vinsauf and Matthew of Vendôme elsewhere within the life that his appeal to secular courtly ideals is quite consciously made, and that the reader was meant to imagine Margaret on the same terms as the sexually desirable secular ideal.⁷⁸ The conventional beauty of the virgin martyrs is significant as it clearly indicates that these saints were not meant to be conceived of in sexually neutral terms, nor that through their virginity they had 'become men'. Not only were they represented in uncompromisingly female form, they fit the image of the desirable ideal.⁷⁹

The unbound hair of the virgin martyrs in visual representations takes on the same meanings as it does for the Pearl Maiden, of the woman who is both desired and untouched. The symbolism of the crowns which they often wear is a little more complex. As with the Pearl Maiden, they symbolize virginity and dedication to Christ, as shown by the example of Cecilia and her chaste husband

Valerian, to whom angels offer crowns of roses as signs of their chastity.⁸⁰ But they are also crowns of martyrdom – a significant aspect of the early Christian iconographic meanings of the crown.⁸¹ Peter Abelard in the twelfth century had written of the double crown of the virgin martyrs: of lilies for virginity, and of roses for martyrdom.⁸² In the case of St Katherine, a royal princess, the crown also points to regal status. Yet the significance of the crown or wreath as a symbol of virginity which is youthful and potentially fertile remains, and is appropriate to the virgin martyrs' life-cycle stage.

Representations of the Virgin Mary in English visual sources of our period also hint at the identification of women's youth with their perfect age. In contrast to her son, tradition had it that she lived on well into old age, and thus well past the perfect age of the body according to the theology of the resurrection.⁸³ Voragine's account of the Assumption of the Virgin says that she was fourteen when she conceived Christ and fifteen when she gave birth to him (that is, at the perfect age of woman) then after his death at thirty-three she survived him by twenty-four years, thus dying at the age of seventy-two. He says another account gives her age at death as sixty.⁸⁴ In either case, at the assumption she is, in human years, an elderly woman.

Turning to visual representation of the Virgin's assumption and coronation, one might expect to find her represented as an old woman, if the artists concerned took a naturalistic course. Alternatively, given the theology of perfect age and the resurrection of the body, one might expect to find her in a 33-year-old body. How would a married woman of that age be represented in this late-medieval English context? She would almost certainly be wimpled, with her hair bound up, and perhaps would have a slightly matronly figure; in short, perhaps she would look like traditional representations of St Anne.⁸⁵ Representations of Mary during the assumption and the coronation do not depict any such a matronly figure. Rather, like the Pearl Maiden and virgin martyrs, she is a maiden, who as queen of heaven has the unbound hair and crown of a maiden on her wedding day.⁸⁶ Scenes of the death, assumption and coronation of the Virgin in the late thirteenth-century Ramsey Psalter depict just such a youthful figure (Fig. 1). Depictions of the coronation are particularly illustrative of my theme, as they depict a mother who looks considerably younger than her son. The bearded, stately and sombre figure of Christ from the early fourteenth-century De Lisle Psalter is representative of the perfect age of man, and the demure, pretty, youthful and maidenly figure of Mary at his side is representative of the perfect age of woman (Fig. 2, p. 14).

Mary's representation is slightly more complex than those of the Pearl Maiden or virgin martyrs. Thus, for example, while she too is a conventional beauty with flowing golden hair,⁸⁷ she is often depicted with a light veil over her hair. This may be meant to signify her state as both virgin and wife, with the unbound hair of the former and the seemingly concealing veil of the latter. She is not, however,

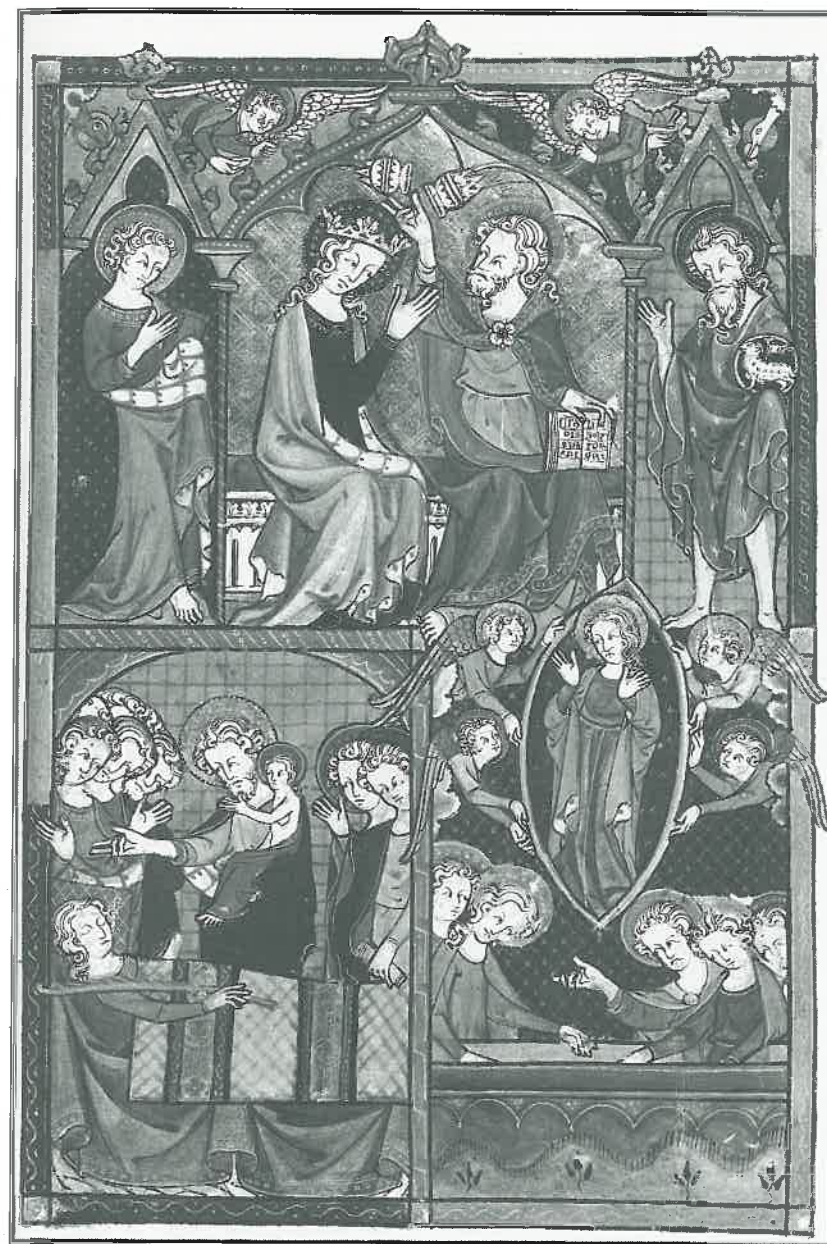


Figure 1: The death, assumption and coronation of the Virgin, late thirteenth century. From *The Ramsey Psalter*, The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.⁸⁸ M. 302, f. 4. Reproduced by permission of the Pierpont Morgan Library.



Figure 2: The coronation of the Virgin, early fourteenth century. From *The De Lisle Psalter*, The British Library. MS Arundel 83 PT 2 F134v. Reproduced by permission of The British Library.

shown wimpled, as one would expect an older married woman to be. Also, her crown and the theme of her coronation hold slightly different meanings than those of the others. While the theme of 'Maria Regina', or the Virgin as queen, dates to the sixth century, the theme of the act of the coronation of the virgin dates only from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁸⁸ It is argued that through this iconography the Virgin is represented in her primary late-medieval role as royal intercessor, who shared in Christ's power over heaven and earth and could be called upon by believers to intercede in earthly affairs.⁸⁹

Yet, as with the virgin martyrs, the multi-layered meanings of the representations of the Virgin do not detract from the observation that she is, in English art of the later Middle Ages, regularly depicted in the body of a conventionally desirable young maiden at the moments of her bodily ascension and her crowning. At these moments, it seems reasonable to assume, it would have been thought appropriate to represent her in the ideal feminine form. That this ideal contrasts so strongly with the ideal of masculinity represented by her son suggests a clear distinction in notions of the perfect age of man and of woman.

CONCLUSION

In taking up the question opened up by Dove's analysis of the perfect age of man, this article has sought representations of feminine figures which might suggest an answer to that question. The female figures chosen to provide that answer were not selected at random, but rather because they provide images of the perfected female body in death. Representations of women in funerary monuments and tomb brasses sometimes also depict similarly maidenly figures, the example of the tomb and crosses of Eleanor of Castile perhaps providing the most obvious example.⁹⁰ A broad study of such monuments, their representations of women, and their variation (over time, for example), might also hold clues to this puzzle.

It might be objected that it is not valid to seek too hard for a single definitive answer to the question posed. If late-medieval English culture had held a firm, fixed and single notion of a perfect age of woman, surely it would have expressed this in clearer ways. For example, a complete alternative tradition to the ages of man scheme – and a notion of the prime age within that – could have been established for women. This would be a fair objection, and I do not suggest that there existed any comparably conscious and thought-through notion of the perfect age of woman as of man. Moreover, it may be said that there was more than one perfect age of woman, and that the age was determined differently by the interests of those who directed particular discourses. In the 'real world' of medieval society, at all social levels, it was not at all desirable that a young woman die in her mid- to late teens. Rather, she should become a wife and a mother, thus fulfilling her obligations to her family and culture and becoming, in

another sense, 'perfected'. In terms of economic or legal capacity, one might argue that a woman was only 'perfected', or made whole and complete, in widowhood, when she could own and control property, businesses and chattels in a way which was greatly limited for women at other stages.

Yet the power of the images discussed cannot be overlooked. As paragons of femininity, the Virgin Mary and the virgin martyrs were present in media which permeated late-medieval English culture. They were visible not only in the books of hours, hagiographic collections and art treasures of the elite, but in the sermons addressed to the laity all the way down the social scale, and in the panel paintings, carvings and stained glass which adorned the simplest parish church. No such broad audience can be envisaged for *Pearl*, but it may be that the Pearl Poet was responding to and borrowing from this well-established and popular image of femininity in constructing the image of the Pearl Maiden. And in death, in their heavenly bodies, these familiar female figures do not resemble wives, matrons or dowagers.

Given the breadth of the image's popularity, it becomes difficult to answer precisely the question, 'For whom was the maiden "perfect"?' Questions of who produced these images, and for whom, are too lengthy and complex to be explored here. But, leaving aside the minutiae of production and reception, it seems reasonable to assert that these ideals of femininity were, ultimately, the product of clerical culture, in which the social values of wifehood, motherhood, or economic and legal capacity, were pushed aside in favour of the spiritual value of chastity. The physical maturity of the maiden makes her chastity all the more valuable, and desirable, to the male clerical elite for whom women were (or were supposed to be) untouchable. It was the power of this group within medieval culture which ensured that representations of the virgin martyrs and Virgin Mary as maidens became ubiquitous, and dominant. In the end, although the perfect age of woman was never as clearly or uniformly expressed as that of man, the most powerful image of ideal femininity available was that of the maiden.

Notes

1. I would like to thank several individuals whose ideas and insights have contributed much to the argument as it is presented in this essay, in particular Jeremy Goldberg, Felicity Riddy, Katherine Lewis, Chris Given-Wilson, Alastair Minnis, and the audience at the 1995 Leeds International Medieval Congress, where an earlier version was delivered.

2. Hans Kurath, Sherman Kuhn and Robert E. Lewis (eds), *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1956-ongoing), s.v. 'maidenli': 'Like a virgin or maiden'; 'maiden': 1.(a) 'An unmarried woman, usually young', 2.(a) 'A virgin'; 'mai': (a) 'A woman; esp. a young attractive woman (married or single)'.

3. On the popularity of virgin martyrs' lives in general and St Katherine in particular see Katherine J. Lewis, "'Rule of lyf alle folk to sewe": Lay Responses to the Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late-Medieval England, 1300-1530', (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of York,

1996), esp. pp. 71-7. See also Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'Saints' Lives and the Female Reader', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 27 (1991), 314-32; Wogan-Browne, 'The Virgin's Tale' in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (eds), *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect* (London, 1994), pp. 165-94; Eamon Duffy, 'Holy Maydens, Holy Wyfes: The Cult of Women Saints in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century England' in W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds), *Women in the Church*, Studies in Church History 27 (Oxford, 1990), 175-96.

4. On their popularity see Lewis, 'Rule of lyf', pp. 71-7; Duffy, 'Holy Maydens, Holy Wyfes', pp. 180-90. On their virginity see Wogan-Browne, 'Virgin's Tale', pp. 172-81. On their potential as role models see Lewis, 'Rule of lyf', esp. pp. 218-57. On their possible use as pornographic figures see Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia, 1991), pp. 21-5.

5. See Figs 1 and 2.

6. For background information on the date, authorship and manuscript of the poem see E.V. Gordon (ed.), *Pearl* (Oxford, 1953), introduction; Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (eds), *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter, 1987), introduction; Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (eds), *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (Cambridge, 1997). References in the text and notes are to the Andrew and Waldron edition, unless otherwise stated.

7. Three authors provide extensive studies of the ages schemes: J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986); Mary Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge, 1986); Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton, 1986). See also Michael E. Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought* (Lanham MD, 1989).

8. *De Anima* Bk III, ch. 12, cited in Burrow, *Ages of Man*, p. 6. See also Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, ed. and tr. George A. Kennedy (New York, 1991), pp. 168-9.

9. Burrow, *Ages of Man* pp. 6-11; Dove, *Perfect Age*, esp. pp. 26-36; Sears, *Ages of Man*, pp. 45, 56, 119.

10. See for example M.C. Scymour et al. (eds), *On the Properties of Things. John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus' De Proprietatibus Rerum. A Critical Text* (2 vols, Oxford, 1975), vol. 1, lib. 6, cap. 1, p. 292: 'Aftir þis adholescencia "striplynges age" cometh þe age þat hatte iuventus, and þis age is in þe middil amonges ages, and þefore it is strengest.'

11. Burrow, *Ages of Man*, pp. 64-6, 69, 102, 104-5, 112; J.A. Burrow, 'Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and the Three Ages of Man' in J.A. Burrow, *Essays on Medieval Literature* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 27-48.

12. She does, however, note that representations of women within the ages schemes were generally exceptional, Sears, *Ages of Man*, p. 24, and points to some visual examples where the lives of men and women are represented side by side, pp. 110-13. These, however, do not mark out middle age as a particularly notable phase in a woman's life cycle.

13. Dove, *Perfect Age*, p. 25.

14. Burrow, *Ages of Man*, p. 30; Dove, *Perfect Age*, pp. 22-3; Sears, *Ages of Man*, pp. 99-113. M.A. Manzaloui (ed.), *Secretum Secretorum: Nine English Versions*, Early English Text Society, Original Series 276 (Oxford, 1977), pp. 55-8, 153-5, 346-9, 572-4; Dante, *Il Convivio* in K. Foster and P. Boyd (eds and tr.), *Dante's Lyric Poetry* (2 vols, Oxford, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 137-9.

15. In this essay, as in Dove's work, the term 'perfect age' is used to refer to a sense of the prime of

life in a broad, cultural sense, rather than in the strictly legal sense (where it could refer to age of consent or majority): see Dove, *Perfect Age*, pp. 13–14. Though the two concepts overlapped, the aim here is to present a view of the phase of life which represented woman's perfect femininity, and this had meanings beyond the purely legal.

16. Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York, 1995), esp. pp. 98, 122; Jackie Tasioulas, 'Seeds of Perfection: The Childlike Soul and the Resurrection of the Body' in P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (eds), *Youth in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, forthcoming); Burrow, *Ages of Man*, pp. 104–5, 135–44.

17. Ephesians 4:13.

18. For more on this subject see Kim M. Phillips, 'The Medieval Maiden: Young Womanhood in Late Medieval England' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of York, 1997), esp. pp. 29–66.

19. Gratian, *Decretum*, sec. pars. c.30, q.2, c.un, and *Decretales Gregorii IX (Liber Extra)*, lib. 4, tit. 2, caps. 1–14, in A.L. Richter and A. Friedberg (eds), *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, 2nd edn (2 vols, Leipzig, 1922); A. Esmein, *Le Mariage en Droit Canonique*, 2nd edn (2 vols, New York, 1968), vol. 1, pp. 211–16; W. Onclin, 'L'Âge Requis pour le Mariage dans la Doctrine Canonique Médiévale' in Stephan Kuttner and J. Joseph Ryan (eds), *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Medieval Canon Law* (Vatican City, 1965), pp. 237–47; R.H. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 98.

20. See J.B. Post, 'Ages at Menarche and Menopause: Some Mediaeval Authorities', *Population Studies* 25 (1971), 83–7, but also Peter Laslett, 'Age at Sexual Maturity in Europe Since the Middle Ages' in Peter Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 214–32; and Darrel W. Amundsen and Carol Jean Diers, 'The Age at Menarche in Medieval Europe', *Human Biology* 45 (1973), 363–9.

21. On wardship and majority see Henry de Bracton, *Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England*, ed. G.E. Woodbine, tr. Samuel E. Thorne (4 vols, Cambridge, MA, 1968), vol. 2, p. 251; Sue Sheridan Walker, 'Proof of Age of Feudal Heirs in Medieval England', *Mediaeval Studies* 35 (1973), 306–23; F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, 2nd edn (2 vols, Cambridge, 1968), vol. 1, p. 320, vol. 2, pp. 438–40. On age of criminal responsibility see William Holdsworth, *A History of English Law* (16 vols, London, 1942), vol. 3, p. 372.

22. See esp. P.J.P. Goldberg, 'Marriage, Migration and Servanthood: The York Cause Paper Evidence', and Richard M. Smith, 'Geographical Diversity in the Resort to Marriage in Late Medieval Europe: Work, Reputation, and Unmarried Females in the Household Formation Systems of Northern and Southern Europe', both in P.J.P. Goldberg (ed.), *Women in Medieval English Society*, 2nd edn (Stroud, 1997), pp. 1–15, 16–59.

23. Phillips, 'Medieval Maiden', pp. 60–6; T.H. Hollingsworth, 'A Demographic Study of the British Ducal Families' in D.V. Glass and D.E.V. Eversley (eds), *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (London, 1965), pp. 364–5. John Carmi Parsons' study of marriage among the Plantagenets, Mortimers and Hollands from 1150 to 1500 shows that even in instances where aristocratic girls were married off soon after puberty, consummation of the match was often delayed by a few years. See his chapter 'Mothers, Daughters, Marriage, Power: Some Plantagenet Evidence, 1150–1500' in John Carmi Parsons (ed.), *Medieval Queenship* (Stroud, 1994), pp. 66–7. His findings strongly suggest that even where marriage took place early in a girl's life, it was not necessarily

considered appropriate that she take on the fully adult roles of sexual partner and mother until she had gained a few more years' maturity.

24. See works by P.J.P. Goldberg, esp. *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300–1520* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 158–86.

25. Other historians dealing with the subject of medieval youth have preferred 'adolescence', for example Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford, 1993), p. 8.

26. For late-medieval English uses of *adolescēntula* see R.E. Latham (ed.), *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (London, 1975–ongoing), s.v. '*adolescēntula*'. For more on the issue of terminology see Phillips, 'Medieval Maiden', pp. 21–5.

27. In their translation of thirteenth-century English texts on virginity, Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne say that while they sought modern equivalents for Middle English words where possible, they made an exception for 'maiden', as there is no current English word which similarly suggests both 'girl' and 'virgin': *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford, 1990), p. xliii.

28. For an overview of the history of the theology of Mary's assumption see Marina Warner, *Alone of all Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, 1976), ch. 6.

29. See for example Burrow, *Ages of Man*, pp. 104–5; Ian Bishop, '*Pearl*' in its Setting (Oxford, 1968), p. 101.

30. Bishop, *ibid.*, p. 101.

31. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Eclogues*, tr. Janet Levarie Smarr (New York, 1987), pp. 156–69. The similarities between *Pearl* and *Olympia* have been noted by scholars since early this century, but it has not proved possible to confirm whether the Pearl Poet was influenced by the latter. *Olympia* survives in a manuscript copy from about 1367–8, and may have been composed earlier, and thus in terms of timing it is possible that the Pearl Poet saw Boccaccio's poem. Gordon suggests *Pearl* may be dated to between 1360 and 1395, and belongs more probably to the latter part of this period, Gordon, *Pearl*, introduction, p. xlv. The fact that *Olympia* is in Latin rather than Italian would have made it more accessible to readers outside Italy. But, in short, no firm connections may be drawn. See Richard Newhauser, 'Sources II: Scriptural and Devotional Sources' in Brewer and Gibson (eds), *Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, p. 268. I am indebted to Felicity Riddy and Nick Havelly for their communications regarding this subject.

32. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and David Herlihy have postulated a Tuscan model of marriage in the later Middle Ages in which girls in their mid- to late teens married men around ten years older than themselves: *The Tuscans and their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven, 1985), pp. 87, 210–11, 215; Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge MA, 1985), pp. 103–11. Richard Smith, along with Jeremy Goldberg, has suggested that this model should be seen as distinctively 'Mediterranean' rather than 'European', and that English girls, for example, can be shown to have married at a later age to men more nearly their contemporaries. See for example R. Smith, 'The People of Tuscany and their Families in the Fifteenth Century: Medieval or Mediterranean?', *Journal of Family History* 6 (1981), 107–28; R. Smith, 'Some Reflections on the Evidence for the Origins of the "European Marriage Pattern" in England' in C.C. Harris (ed.), *The Sociology of the Family: New Directions for Britain*, Sociological Review Monograph 28, (Keele, 1979); and see n. 23, above.

33. The Maiden's age at the time of her death is stated: 'þow lyfed not two 3er in oure þede' (483), while the relationship between dreamer and maiden is implied when the former says 'Ho wat3 me nerre þen aunte or nece' (233). There has been debate over the interpretation of the poem since early this century. Some have read it as pure allegory, with the Pearl Maiden representing some abstract concept such as purity, while others have taken a more literal approach, seeing her as the daughter of the dreamer. A useful approach seems to be to see that the Pearl Maiden combines realistic and symbolic qualities. See Andrew and Waldron (eds), *Pearl MS*, p. 32, n. 7; P.M. Kean, *The Pearl: An Interpretation* (London, 1967), pp. 115–20; Bishop, 'Pearl', p. 15; John Conley (ed.), *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays* (Notre Dame, 1970); and more recently, David Aers, 'The Self Mourning: Reflections on Pearl' in *Speculum* 68 (1993), 54–73, pp. 55–6.

34. Gordon notes that the Maiden's dress is 'a very simple form of the aristocratic dress of the second half of the fourteenth century', with the very long sleeves – 'lappe3 large' (201) – characteristic of aristocratic dress, *Pearl*, p. 56, n. 228.

35. D.S. Brewer, 'The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially "Harley Lyrics", Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans', *Modern Language Review* 50 (1955), 257–69; Walter Clyde Curry, *The Middle English Ideal of Personal Beauty; As Found in the Metrical Romances, Chronicles, and Legends of the XIII, XIV, and XV Centuries* (Baltimore, 1916); Kim M. Phillips, 'The Medieval Beauty Myth: An Aesthetics of Virginity', *Medieval Life* 5 (1996), 10–13.

36. Matthew of Vendôme, *The Art of Versification*, tr. Aubrey E. Galyon (Ames, 1980), p. 43; Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *The Poetria Nova*, tr. in Ernest Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine* (The Hague, 1971), pp. 45–7.

37. See for example the description of Felice in *The Romance of Guy of Warwick*, ed. Julius Zupitza, Early English Text Society, extra series 42, 49 and 59 (Oxford, 1883, 1887, and 1891, reprinted in one volume 1966), ll. 65–74, p. 7. See also descriptions of courtly beauties in Rossell Hope Robbins (ed.), *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 120–8, 144–5, 183, 223; and G.L. Brook (ed.), *The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of MS Harley 2253* (Manchester, 1968), pp. 33–4, 37–41.

38. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, p. 45.

39. 'Lay le Freine', ll. 238–40, 257–70; 'Havelok the Dane', ll. 258–9, both in Donald B. Sands (ed.), *Middle English Verse Romances* (University of Exeter Press, 1986), pp. 241–2, 65.

40. 'The Miller's Tale', ll. 3221–70, 'The Physician's Tale', ll. 7–8, 30–8, from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* in Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 68–70, 190.

41. Matthew of Vendôme *Versification*, p. 44. The female grotesque found literary expression in the Loathly Lady: see for example 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell', ll. 231–43, in Sands (ed.), *ME Verse Romances*, pp. 331–2.

42. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (London, 1956), p. 11 and *passim*; Kenneth Clark, *Feminine Beauty* (London, 1980); Arthur Marwick, *Beauty in History: Society, Politics and Personal Appearance c. 1500 to the Present* (London, 1988).

43. Marwick fervently denies any political element to perceptions of beauty, and presents his views as natural or self-evident: 'All the complicated talk of politics and power struggles and male conspiracy and oppression seem to me to miss the simple heart of the matter: the sheer uncomplicated joy of going to bed with a beautiful woman', p. 21. Angela Carter suggests an

alternative title for Marwick's book as 'Women I have fancied throughout the ages with additional notes on some of the men I think I might have fancied if I were a woman' in her review, 'I Could Have Fancied Her', *London Review of Books* 11 (February 1989), p. 8.

44. Anne Hollander *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York, 1975).

45. Margaret Miles, 'The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture' in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.), *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge MA, 1986).

46. The artist who produced the four drawings contained in the manuscript did not precisely follow the description of the Pearl Maiden supplied in the text. In the two illustrations depicting the Pearl Maiden she is shown to have her hair done in plaits and bound up on either side of her head; see *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience and Sir Gawain, Reproduced in Facsimile from the Unique MS Cotton Nero A.x. in the British Museum*, introduction by I. Gollancz, Early English Text Society, Original Series 162 (Oxford, 1923), ff. 38r and 38v. This style may have been meant as a more realistic than symbolic representation of a maiden, as young unmarried women seem often to have worn their hair up or covered in their daily lives. Loose hair was a recognizable symbol of maidenhood, but that does not mean that all maidens wore their hair down day-to-day.

47. Timothy Husband with Gloria Gilmore, *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism* (New York, 1980).

48. For the *vitae* of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, tr. William Granger Ryan (2 vols, Princeton, 1993), vol. 1, pp. 227–9, 374–83. On loose hair as a sign of penitence see Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston, 1989), pp. 48–51. On the hair of Mary Magdalene see Katherine L. French, 'The Legend of Lady Godiva and the Image of the Female Body', *Journal of Medieval History* 18 (1992), 3–19, pp. 15–16.

49. For St Agnes see *The Golden Legend* vol. 1, pp. 101–4; For Lady Godiva see French, 'Lady Godiva', and Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London, 1985), pp. 307–10.

50. 'Every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head', 1 Corinthians 11:5. 'Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?: Doth not even nature itself teach you, that if a man have long hair it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given to her for a covering', 1 Cor. 11:13–15. The Apostle seems oblivious to the self-contradiction of his statement – that hair must be covered, and that it is in itself a covering. Herein lies a central meaning of women's hair in Christian thought, as at once unseemly and glorious. Tertullian, 'On the Veiling of Virgins' in S. Thelwall (ed. and tr.), *The Writings of Tertullian*, Ante-Nicene Christian Library 18 (3 vols, Edinburgh, 1870), vol. 3, pp. 154–80. See Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, pp. 49–50, and Mary Rose D'Angelo, 'Veils, Virgins, and the Tongues of Men and Angels: Women's Heads in Early Christianity' in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (eds), *Off with Her Head: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995). The latter volume also contains interpretations of the meanings of loose, bound, covered or cut hair across a number of cultures.

51. Henry Thomas Riley (ed.), *Liber Albus in Munimenta Gildhallae Londoniensis*, Rolls Series 12 (3 vols, London, 1859–62), vol. 1, p. 459.

52. See the orders for the consecration of nuns in J.B.L. Tolhurst (ed.), *The Ordinale and Customary of the Benedictine Nuns of Barking Abbey*, Henry Bradshaw Society 65-6 (2 vols, London, 1927-28), vol. 2, pp. 353-5: 'Et postea ponat uelamen super caput uirginis dicens. Accipe uirgo christi uelamen uirginitatis', p. 354. See also the order of consecration of nuns in William Maskell (ed.), *Monumenta Ritualia Ecclesiae Anglicanae* (3 vols, London, 1846-7), vol. 2, pp. 308-31: 'And then shall the bisshop delyver or put uppon yche of theym theyr veyle: saying to every of theym, severally: Accipe, Christi uirgo, uelamen uirginitatis et continentiae indicium', p. 319.

53. Chaucer's Griselda, on her wedding day, has her hair 'kembed, that lay untressed/ Ful rudely', 'The Clerk's Tale', ll. 379-80, p. 142. See Phillis Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, *Costumes for Births, Marriages and Deaths* (London, 1972), pp. 92-3. Lyndal Roper shows that brides in Reformation Augsburg often wore their hair loose until after their weddings, and then adopted wimples, "'Going to Church and Street": Weddings in Reformation Augsburg', *Past and Present* 106 (1985), 62-101, p. 88. Arnold van Gennep claims that the cutting of hair on the day of marriage symbolizes a girl's movement from one age group to another, *The Rites of Passage*, tr. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabriel L. Caffee (Chicago, 1960), p. 167, and it is possible that the medieval practice is a variant of an ancient one shared by many cultures.

54. Elizabeth Danbury, 'Images of English Queens in the Later Middle Ages', *The Historian* 46 (1995), 3-9; John Carmi Parsons, 'Ritual and Symbol in English Medieval Queenship to 1500' in Louise Olga Fradenburg (ed.), *Women and Sovereignty* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 62; Joanna Chamberlayne, 'Queenship in the Fifteenth Century' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of York) and her article in the present volume.

55. Millett and Wogan-Browne (eds and tr.), 'A Letter on Virginity' in *Medieval English Prose for Women*, p. 21.

56. *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage*, l. 67, in Tauno F. Mustanoja (ed.), *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter, The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage, The Thewis of Gud Women* (Helsinki, 1948), p. 175.

57. Osbert of Clare, writing to his niece Cecilia, quoted in Barbara Newman, 'Flaws in the Golden Bowl: Gender and Spiritual Formation in the Twelfth Century', *Traditio* 45 (1989-90), 111-46, p. 127.

58. The wreath as a victor's crown at the ancient Olympic games features in mythology. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (2 vols, Harmondsworth, 1960), vol. 1, pp. 185-7.

59. Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, tr. Janet Seligman (2 vols, London, 1972), vol. 1, pp. 100-1, 133-4; vol. 2, pp. 5, 106, 108; André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins* (London, 1969), p. 41.

60. Janet L. Nelson, 'Inauguration Rituals' in her *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London, 1986), p. 295, reprinted from P.H. Sawyer and I.N. Wood (eds), *Early Medieval Kingship* (Leeds, 1977). I owe this reference to Joel Burden.

61. Graves, *Greek Myths* vol. 1, pp. 224, 237, 271. Note that men as well as women could wear garlands. On the use of crowns or wreaths of flowers during Roman and early medieval marriage rituals see René Metz, 'La Couronne et l'Anneau dans la Consécration des Vierges', *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 28 (1954), 113-32, pp. 116-19, reprinted in R. Metz, *La Femme et l'Enfant dans le Droit Canonique Médiéval* (London, 1985).

62. Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 27-31, 115-17; Roper, 'Church and Street', p. 88; Cunnington and Lucas, *Costumes*, p. 92.

63. Metz, 'La Couronne et l'Anneau', argues that the consecration of nuns borrowed symbolism, including that of the wedding crown or wreath, from the Roman and early-medieval ritual of marriage.

64. *The Golden Legend*, vol. 1, 368; C.A. Luttrell, 'The Medieval Tradition of the Pearl Virginity', *Medium Aevum* 31 (1962), 194-200; James W. Earl, 'Saint Margaret and the Pearl Maiden', *Modern Philology* 70 (1972), 1-8.

65. On baptism see Cunnington and Lucas, *Costumes*, p. 41; Bishop, 'Pearl', pp. 114-21. On white clothes as appropriate for professed virgins see Tolhurst (ed.), *Ordinale . . . Barking Abbey*, p. 353; Margery Kempe's adoption of white clothes, and the Archbishop of York's puzzlement: 'Why gost þu in white? Art þu a mayden?', S.B. Meech and H.E. Allen, (eds), *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Early English Text Society, Original Series 212 (Oxford, 1940), pp. 32, 124; Mary C. Erler, 'Margery Kempe's White Clothes', *Medium Aevum* 62 (1993), 78-83; Dyan Elliott, 'Dress as Mediator Between Inner and Outer Self: The Pious Matron of the High and Later Middle Ages', *Mediaeval Studies* 53 (1991), 279-308, pp. 294-5.

66. Unless otherwise stated, references to the lives of the virgin martyrs are taken from Ryan's translation of *The Golden Legend*. The lives of Margaret, Christina, Ursula and the eleven-thousand virgins, Faith, Agnes, Dorothy, Katherine, Cecilia, Agatha and Lucy are also contained in Osborn Bokenham's mid-fifteenth-century Middle English *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. Mary S. Serjeantson, Early English Text Society, Original Series 206 (Oxford, 1938).

67. *The Golden Legend*, vol. 1, pp. 102, 368; vol. 2, p. 334; Bokenham, *Legendys*, pp. 12, 58, 85, 113, 175.

68. *Jacobi a Voragine, Legenda Aurea Vulgo Historia Lombardica Dicta*, ed. Thomas Graesse (Osnabrück, 1969), e.g. pp. 31, 178, 402, 621, 633, 635, 776, 791.

69. Bokenham, *Legendys*, p. 254.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

72. See Burrow, *Ages of Man*, p. 143.

73. Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. H. Rackham (Cambridge MA, 1932), pp. 617-9; *The Governance of Kings and Princes. John Trevisa's Middle English Translation of the De Regimine Principum of Aegidius Romanus*, tr. David C. Fowler, Charles F. Briggs, and Paul G. Remley (New York, 1997), bk 2, pt 1, ch. 16, p. 196; Peter Biller, "'Demographic Thought" around 1300 and Dante's Florence' in John C. Barnes and Cormac Ó Cuilleain (eds), *Dante and the Middle Ages: Literary and Historical Essays* (Dublin, 1995), p. 67.

74. *The Golden Legend*, vol. 1, p. 268.

75. David Hugh Farmer (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, 1992), p. 28. For a visual example of St Apollonia represented alongside and resembling the other virgin martyrs see the reproduction of the south rood screen at Westhall Church, East Anglia in Duffy, 'Holy Maydens, Holy Wyfes', p. 183, pl. 2. I owe the example of Apollonia to Katherine Lewis.

76. For visual examples from later medieval English manuscript illustrations, see J.J.G. Alexander (ed.), *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles* (6 vols, London, 1975-1996): vol. 5, Lucy Freeman Sandler, *Gothic Manuscripts 1285-1385* (2 parts, London, 1986), pt 1, no. 168; and vol. 6, Kathleen L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts 1390-1490* (2 parts, London, 1996), pt 1, nos 92, 231, 460, 461. For examples from panel paintings see Duffy, 'Holy Maydens, Holy Wyfes', pls 1-3.

77. Bokenham, *Legendys*, p. 13.

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 32.

79. Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, argues that feminine beauty was always problematic within medieval Christianity because of its threat to male chastity, and that the mutilation experienced by the virgin martyrs before martyrdom may be read as part of the discourse of the grotesque, pp. 70–1, 156. I feel this is something of a simplification, and that Miles is too quick to dismiss the significance of the appeal of the virgin martyrs to the heterosexual male viewer. It must be significant that the mutilations which they experience are not the cause of their martyrdoms, but instead are miraculously healed. Their beauty is thus not diminished before death, which usually takes place by beheading. Veronica Sekules notes the convention of representing holy women as beautiful, and suggests that this, along with their riches, is meant to convey to the viewer an idea of their sanctity which is conveyed through earthly notions of superiority, 'Women and Art in England in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries' in Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski (eds), *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200–1400* (London, 1987), p. 43.

80. *The Golden Legend*, vol. 2, p. 319.

81. Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, p. 41.

82. Cited in Newman, 'Golden Bowl', p. 123.

83. *The Golden Legend*, vol. 2, p. 78 provides an account of the Virgin's biography. For a Middle English version see Peter Meredith (ed.), *The Mary Play from the N Town Manuscript* (London, 1987).

84. *The Golden Legend*, vol. 2, p. 78.

85. For examples from manuscript illuminations see Sandler, *Gothic MSS*, pt 1, nos 2 and 388; Scott, *Later Gothic MSS*, pt 1, nos 95 and 198.

86. For late thirteenth- to late fifteenth-century English representations of a maidenly Virgin Mary during her assumption see Sandler, *Gothic MSS*, pt 1, nos 147 and 372; Scott, *Later Gothic MSS*, pt 1, nos. 51 and 156. For a maidenly Virgin Mary during the act of her coronation see Sandler, pt 1, nos 39, 111, 167, 169, 194, 281; Scott, pt 1, nos 6, 51, 381, 408.

87. On the virgin's later-medieval resemblance to courtly beauties see Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 220–41.

88. On the iconography of the Virgin as Queen see Rosemary Muir Wright, 'The Virgin in the Sun and in the Tree' in Fradenburg (ed.), *Women and Sovereignty*; Warner, *Alone of all Her Sex*, pp. 81–117; Engelbert Kirschbaum, *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie* (Rome, 1970), cols 671–5, s.v. 'Krönung Mariens'. Bruce Bernard, *The Queen of Heaven: A Selection of Paintings of the Virgin Mary from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1987), pls 160–4 provide late-medieval (non-English) examples of the youthful, blonde, crowned Virgin.

89. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Marian Devotion in the Western Church' in Jill Raitt (ed.), *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedia of the Religious Quest 17 (New York, 1987), pp. 405–10.

90. David Parsons (ed.), *Eleanor of Castile 1290–1990: Essays to Commemorate the 700th Anniversary of Her Death: 28 November, 1290* (Stamford, 1991), pls 10–11, 13–16.