

Wives, mothers and widows on pilgrimage: categories of ‘woman’ recorded at English healing shrines in the High Middle Ages

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This article examines the types of women undertaking pilgrimage in medieval England as recorded in a range of twelfth-century miracle collections. Miracle narratives provide details of pilgrims visiting local saints’ shrines, and are often used by scholars to conduct sociological surveys of a shrine’s clientele. This article extends this methodology by analysing women pilgrims within two common medieval frameworks of collective identity: the six ‘ages of man’, and the four familial/sexual life stages of women. Exploring the ways in which hagiographers identified, categorised and, indeed, stereotyped women pilgrims, the essay re-appraises the customary sociological approach to miracle narratives, and assesses both the social reality and the cultural representation of female pilgrimage in these twelfth-century sources.

Keywords: female pilgrimage; miracle narratives; High Middle Ages; England; hagiography; saints’ cults; ages of man; female life cycle

The High Middle Ages was a time of religious renewal and diversity in Western Europe. Many pious activities were increasingly taken up by the laity, and one of the most popular lay religious practices was pilgrimage. The cult of saints was at its height by the mid twelfth century, and women as well as men flocked to local shrines, many in the hope of attaining miraculous healing or other intercessory aid.¹

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¹ References to miracle collections have been abbreviated as follows: *Æbbe*: *Vita et miracula S. Æbbe virginis*, in R. Bartlett, ed. and trans., *The Miracles of St Æbbe of Coldingham and St Margaret of Scotland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 2–67; *Æthelthryth*: *Miracula Sancta Aetheldrethe virginis*, in Rosalind C. Love, ed. and trans., *Goscelin of Saint-Bertin: the Hagiography of the Female Saints of Ely* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 96–131; *Aldhelm*: William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 1: 498–663; *Dunstan*: Eadmer of Canterbury, *Vita Sancti Dunstani archiepiscopi Cantuariensis*, in *Eadmer of Canterbury, Lives and Miracles of Saints Oda, Dunstan and Oswald*, ed. and trans. Andrew J. Turner and Bernard J. Muir (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 161–211; *Edmund*: Abbot Samson, *Miracula sancti Edmundi*, in *Memorials of St Edmund’s Abbey*, ed. Thomas Arnold. Rolls Series 96. 3 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1890–6), 1: 107–208; *Erkenwald*: Arcoid, *Miracula sancti Erkenwaldi*, in *The Saint of London: the Life and Miracles of St Erkenwald, Text and Translation*, ed. and trans. E. Gordon Whatley (Binghampton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1989), 100–64; *Frideswide*: Prior Philip, *Miracula S. Frideswidæ*, in *Acta Sanctorum*, VIII Oct. (Antwerp and Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1853), 567–89; *Gilbert*: R. Foreville and G. Keir, ed. and trans., *The Book of St Gilbert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); *Godric*: Reginald of Durham, *Libellus de vita et miraculis S. Godrici, heremitæ de Finchale; appendix miraculorum*, ed. Joseph Stevenson. Surtees Society 20 (London: Nichols, 1845), 371–499; *Ithamar*: D. Bethell, ‘The Miracles of St Ithamar’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 89 (1971): 421–37; *Ivo*: Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, *Miracula S. Ivonis*, in William D. Macray, ed., *Chronicon abbatiae Rameseiensis*. Rolls Series, 83 (London: Longman

Most of our evidence for lay involvement in pilgrimage at this period is derived from miracle collections, compilations of stories describing miraculous events reported by pilgrims visiting saints' shrines. Compiled at local monasteries, and written by monks or clerics, miracle collections were part of a wider hagiographical tradition and were considered important testimonies of a saint's posthumous intercessory power.² By the twelfth century the style and nature of the narratives were changing. The texts were becoming increasingly descriptive, and often included witness statements and personal information about individual pilgrims, such as their ages and social backgrounds. They also featured more women as beneficiaries of miracles than in earlier periods, arguably reflecting an increase in female pilgrimage at this time. Taking advantage of this wealth of sociological detail, modern scholars have often used miracle narratives as the basis for surveys of shrine clientele, and particularly those from twelfth-century England where extant Latin miracle collections are especially numerous.³ Although statistical studies have led to speculation about the types of pilgrims attracted to particular cult centres, surprisingly little of this scholarship has focused specifically on women.⁴ That which does tends to concentrate on one aspect of women's lives: motherhood, and the large proportion of mothers recorded at healing shrines with sick children.⁵

and Co., 1886), lix–lxxxiv; James: B. Kemp, 'The Miracles of the Hand of St James', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal* 65 (1970): 1–19; Milburga: Ato of Ostia, ed. P.A. Hayward, 'The Miracula inventionis beate Mylburgae virginis', *English Historical Review* 114 (1999): 543–73; Modwenna: Geoffrey of Burton, *Vita sancte Moduene virginis*, in R. Bartlett, ed. and trans., *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 164–219; Swithun: *Miracula S. Swithuni*, in Michael Lapidge, ed. and trans., *The Cult of St Swithun*. Winchester Studies, 4.2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 648–97; William: Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich*, ed. and trans. A. Jessopp and M.R. James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896).

Studies on medieval pilgrimage include Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: an Image of Medieval Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975); John Ure, *Pilgrimage: the Great Adventure of the Middle Ages* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2006); Diana Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West*, 2nd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris 2001); eadem, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon, 2000). For female pilgrimage, see Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance* (London: Routledge, 2000); Leigh Ann Craig, *Wandering Women and Holy Matrons: Women as Pilgrims in the Later Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); and Diana Webb, 'Women Pilgrims of the Middle Ages', *History Today* 48, no. 7 (1998): 20–6.

² Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event, 1000–1215*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 166; Ronald Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 102, 156. For general studies on miracle collections in medieval Western Europe, see Finucane and Ward (above), and Pierre-André Sigal, *L'homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale: XIe–XIIIe siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985). For English collections, Simon Yarrow, *Saints and Their Communities: Miracle Stories in Twelfth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) and Rachael Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

³ It has been estimated that at least 75 miracle collections were produced in England between 1080 and 1220. Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 2. In addition to Finucane and Yarrow above, n. 2, see J.M. Theilmann, 'English Peasants and Medieval Miracle Lists', *The Historian* 52 (1990): 286–303; Eleanora C. Gordon, 'Child Health in the Middle Ages as Seen in the Miracles of Five English Saints, AD 1150–1250', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 60 (1986): 502–22; Raymonde Foreville, 'Miracula S. Thomae Cantuariensis', in *Actes du 97e Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes, Nantes 1972, Section de Philologie et d'Histoire Jusqu'à 1610* (Paris, 1979): 443–67; Robert Bartlett, 'The Miracles of Saint Modwenna of Burton', *Staffordshire Studies* 8 (1996): 24–35.

⁴ Finucane and Yarrow only mention women in passing, for example. Craig devotes a chapter to high medieval miracle narratives in *Wandering Women*, 79–130.

⁵ For this theme more generally, see Craig, *Wandering Women*, 92–8; Morrison, *Women Pilgrims*, 3–42; Kathleen Quirk, 'Men, Women and Miracles in Normandy, 1050–1150', in *Medieval Memories: Men, Women and the Past, 700–1300*, ed. Elisabeth Van Houts (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 53–71.

Such observations raise questions about a possible wider social spectrum of female pilgrims. Are mothers the only type of women mentioned in miracle stories? Are wives, widows or elderly women also represented, for example? Moreover, to what extent can the presence or absence of different categories of female pilgrims in these sources tell us about the scope, and nature, of women's participation in pilgrimage in the High Middle Ages, and does this hagiographical evidence hold other social or cultural significance?

The purpose of this article is to answer these questions by conducting a survey and analysis of female cultural identities in a sample of 16 Latin miracle collections compiled in England in the long twelfth century (*c.*1080–*c.*1200). The saints associated with these sources fall into three main types: the well-established traditional saints (Swithun, Edmund, Æthelthryth, Aldhelm, James the Great), newly discovered 'old' saints (Æbbe, Erkenwald, Frideswide, Ithamar, Ivo, Milburga, Modwenna), and 'new', recently living, saints (Dunstan, Gilbert, Godric and William of Norwich). Only five of these saints are female: Æbbe, Æthelthryth, Frideswide, Milburga and Modwenna.

The sources are intended to be illustrative rather than representative, and incorporate many inevitable biases. Governed by the survival of manuscripts and the availability of printed editions, their selection is additionally determined by a conscious gender bias: texts were deliberately chosen which record a relatively high presence of female pilgrims. Although the sources are intended to represent, as far as possible, the whole period under review, nearly a third of the 16 collections were compiled in the last three decades of the twelfth century. Inclusion of the Becket collection – written in the 1170s and comprising over 700 stories – would have quantitatively overwhelmed the data available from the earlier sources. For this reason, the Becket *miracula* have been excluded from the statistics, although they provide the article with illustrative examples.

For the purpose of this study, a 'pilgrim' is defined as a man, woman or child who can be identified from the text as being present at a shrine after a journey. It includes, for the sake of logic, monastic residents who 'travel' – in the sense of moving – from the monastic infirmary to the shrine, but excludes those whose personal appearance at a shrine is not mentioned. Beggars, thieves and travelling merchants are also included, as are involuntary pilgrims such as the mentally alienated, the possessed, the unconscious and infants or young children. In order to maintain consistency, it has also been necessary to discount stories where there is no mention of a journey, even if the omission is likely to be due to authorial slip rather than deliberate intent.

The definition of a pilgrim as one who is described travelling to, and venerating at, a saint's shrine differs from previous surveys based on miracle-narrative records (for example, those of Ronald Finucane, Benedicta Ward and Simon Yarrow) which typically focus on miracle beneficiaries rather than on pilgrims. The distinction is important because miracle beneficiaries and pilgrims do not necessarily coincide in miracle accounts, and this has a bearing on the statistics in two respects. First, miracles do not only happen to pilgrims. Non-pilgrim miracle beneficiaries appear in all but two collections covered in the present survey (the *miracula* of Æbbe and Milburga), and account for 11% of all individuals mentioned in the sources under review. These include subjects of deliverance miracles, the unfortunate victims of retribution miracles, a few visionaries, a large contingent of resident monks, nuns and priests, and those whose presence at the shrine is not recorded by hagiographers. Non-pilgrim protagonists are not included in the survey. Second, not all pilgrims in the narratives are depicted as the subjects of miracles, and the survey includes a fairly substantial cast of secondary characters – such as pilgrim companions, witnesses and bystanders – which is habitually overlooked by historians. Included in the statistics, these relations, friends, villagers and strangers account for nearly a quarter of the total number of pilgrims in the sources under review.

Together, these sources provide a database of 1027 pilgrim subjects for detailed analysis, just over half of whom (52%) are women (Table 1). This sample survey is not intended to be representative of wider sociological or even hagiographical patterns, but rather it aims to highlight recurring clerical ideas about women in the century or so after the Gregorian reform movement: a period renowned, on the one hand, for its worsening attitudes towards the ‘weaker sex’ and, on the other, for the opening up of religious opportunities for women. Spanning a century that witnessed many social and religious changes, and written for a variety of reasons in a range of different contexts, the individual texts which form the basis of the survey collectively illuminate some important shared concepts concerning women in a particular religious milieu.

Although some consideration is given to the social realities of female pilgrimage in twelfth-century England, the main focus of the investigation is on the cultural representations of women, and particularly on the age-related identities and labels given to female pilgrims by the hagiographers who re-tell their stories in these 16 miracle collections. The study both examines the terminology chosen to describe women, and also explores the attitudes and ideologies associated with the conceptual female age categories revealed by this evidence, especially in the context of pilgrimage. Two lines of enquiry will be followed. First, there is an examination of the Latin vocabulary and terminology employed to describe women in the texts using, as a frame of reference, two classification systems popular in the medieval world. The first, known as the ‘ages of man’, distinguished individuals according to set chronological periods of life ranging from infancy to old age. Because this template is recognised as having limited relevance for medieval women, the ‘life-cycle’ scheme, which notionally divided women into the categories of virgin, wife, mother and widow, is also considered. Both models are classical in origin. However, whereas the first remained primarily secular in nature in the Middle Ages, the second developed additional spiritual connotations as it was adopted by Christian culture. Some thought will therefore also be given to sexual stereotyping and the extent to which medieval typologies of womanhood are idealised in the stories. Taken together, these categories of human lifespans provide a useful way of surveying a wide variety of individuals in medieval narrative sources, and offer a practical framework for examining the hagiographical representations of women in the miracle genre.

Table 1. Pilgrim numbers recorded in the sample miracle collections

<i>Miracula</i>	Number of pilgrims	Male pilgrims	Female pilgrims
Æbbe	64	25	39
Æthelthryth	13	7	6
Aldhelm	23	15	8
Dunstan	24	13	11
Edmund	47	29	18
Erkenwald	20	11	9
Frideswide	143	49	94
Gilbert	70	33	37
Godric	309	112	197
Ithamar	14	8	6
Ivo	39	30	9
James	29	15	14
Milburga	8	4	4
Modwenna	14	10	4
Swithun	72	50	22
William	138	79	59
Total	1027	490	537

A second line of enquiry considers these female identities in relation to pilgrimage. Although it is generally accepted that motherhood was an important motivating factor for female pilgrimage in the medieval West, little is known about how other life stages – such as virginity, adolescence, widowhood and old age – affected women's propensity to travel. In asking why some types of women occur less frequently in the sources, the study will consider whether this evidence suggests that some aspects of womanhood were less conducive to female travel than others, or whether there are other explanations for these absences.

In offering the first systematic evaluation of the types of women recorded in English miracle collections, this article both draws on and reappraises the statistical methodology first made popular in the 1970s by Ronald Finucane.⁶ Its approach also radically differs from that of social historians, such as Simon Yarrow and Robert Bartlett, examining the same sources.⁷ The more usual scholarly aim is, in the words of Michael Goodich, to 'avoid focusing on the standard topoi of the miracle and try to minimise the major ideologically charged issues' in order to 'draw a picture of the cult and its constituents'.⁸ Although it is widely acknowledged that miracle stories reflected – and perhaps promoted – contemporary Christian values, the impact of these ideologies on the ways in which pilgrimage and its participants are depicted in the narratives has not been fully addressed. In bringing to the fore this little-discussed aspect of these texts, this article uncovers hagiographical attitudes towards female pilgrims and offers a more rounded understanding of the nature and function of the miracle genre during this period.

If treated judiciously, miracle narratives furnish historians with a rich social and cultural resource, and what follows demonstrates how this evidence can be used to provide important insight into both the social reality and the cultural representation of 'womanhood' and female pilgrimage in High Medieval England.

The ages of man (and woman)

The classificatory scheme commonly known as the 'ages of man' (*aetates hominum*) charted an individual's life-journey from infancy to old age through a series of chronological stages.⁹ Different classical versions were inherited in the Middle Ages, for example through *florilegia* and Latin dictionaries citing classical authors such as Cicero and Seneca.¹⁰ In the seventh century these were standardised into a six-ages model by the encyclopaedist Isidore of Seville (c.560–636). Until the dissemination in Western Europe of the rival four-ages version of Avicenna (c.980–1037) in the thirteenth century, Isidore's 'six ages of man', together with its associated terminology, was the one most referred to in the Middle Ages.¹¹ Isidore's famous encyclopaedic work, the *Etymologiae*, was a common staple of monastic libraries in the High Middle Ages, and it seems likely that his 'ages of man' scheme was well-known to most hagiographers. In Book Eleven of the *Etymologiae* Isidore identified six life phases: *infantia*, *pueritia*, *adolescencia*, *juventus*,

⁶ Finucane, *Miracles*; idem, *Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

⁷ Yarrow, *Saints*; Bartlett, 'Saint Modwenna'.

⁸ Michael Goodich, 'Mirabilis Deus in sanctis suis: Social History and Medieval Miracles', in *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representations of Divine Power in the Life of the Church*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory. Studies in Church History 41 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 2005), 155.

⁹ See, for example, John A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: a Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Michael Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age: the Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought, 1250–1350* (London: University Press of America, 1989).

¹⁰ Goodich, *Birth to Old Age*, 4.

¹¹ Goodich, *Birth to Old Age*, 42, 60–1. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. W.M. Lindsay. 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), 2: 38–9.

seniores and *senectus*, which loosely equate to modern concepts of infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth, maturity and old age.

Childhood: *infantia* and *pueritia*

Isidore's first two ages-of-man stages were *infantia* (infancy) and *pueritia* (childhood), the former taking a child from birth up until the age of seven, the latter spanning the ages seven to 12 (for girls) and seven to 14 (for boys).¹² In the sources under review, children falling into these categories are most commonly identified by the terms *infans* (infant) and *puer/puella* (boy/girl). Occasionally the diminutives *parvulus/parvula* ('little one') or *puerulus* ('little boy') are also used. Some children are described in terms of years of age. Where a combination is used, it is possible to appreciate the fluidity of some of these age-related terms. *Puer* and *puella*, for example, signify individuals ranging from 15 months to 16 years: in other words, well beyond the theoretical span of boundaries of *pueritia*.¹³

About one in eight pilgrims in the stories falls into this 'childhood' category. Half of these are female (Figure 1), the majority of whom are described as *puellae*. It is tempting to surmise that the more-or-less equal division between the sexes in this combined 'childhood' group contradicts previous research suggesting that far more boys than girls were taken to curative shrines in the Middle Ages as a result of higher accident rates amongst boys and possible parental bias.¹⁴ However, this boy–girl ratio should be used with caution owing to a problem of terminology. Not only did girls drop out of the *pueritia* age-range two years earlier than boys in the Isidorean scheme, giving boys a chronological advantage, but the noun *puella* seems to have a looser meaning in the narratives than its male equivalent, *puer*. Indeed, the word *puella* is sometimes used synonymously with the terms *infans*, *juvencula* and *virgo*, and it is likely that hagiographers often used *puella* as a generic term to describe unmarried females living at home.¹⁵

There are further problems with this terminology. In the Middle Ages, the terms *puer* and *puella* occasionally carry status, rather than years-of-age, connotations and might be used for dependent adults such as servants. Late medieval documents, such as coroners' rolls, following classical usage, sometimes used the word *puer* to indicate both boys and girls.¹⁶ Although context usually indicates that *pueri* and *puellae* were indeed children in the sources under review, and there is no specific evidence suggesting that *puer* was used in a generic sense, it is worth bearing in mind that these particular medieval nomenclatures enjoyed a wider popular use than Isidore's years-of-age scheme suggests.

The majority of male and female children in the narratives are recorded as miracle beneficiaries, and most are shown being taken to a saint's shrine by either one or both parents. Although

¹² For general discussions on *infantia* and *pueritia*, see Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge 1990), 23–6; Goodich, *Birth to Old Age*, 85–96.

¹³ Godric, 372–3 (15 months); Frideswide, 578 (almost six years). Although the terms *puer* and *puella* could denote dependent adults such as servants in the Middle Ages, context indicates that most *pueri* and *puellae* in the stories were children.

¹⁴ Ronald Finucane, *Rescue of the Innocents*, 159–61.

¹⁵ This was the case in late medieval wills and tax assessments. See Kim M. Phillips, 'Four Virgins' Tales: Sex and Power in Medieval Law', in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 94–5; and Cordelia Beattie, *Medieval Single Women: the Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 79–83.

¹⁶ For example, Kew, The National Archives, JUST 2/49, m. 3r, inquisition at Nether Broughton (Broughton in le Vale), Leics., 1363: 'Alicia filia Roberti Fouler de Broghton puer etatis unius anni'; C.T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 1486, s.v. *puer* (author would like to thank Chris Woolgar for supplying this reference).

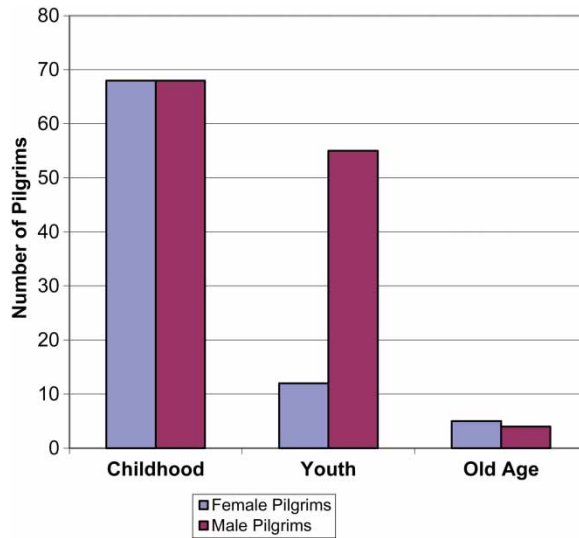


Figure 1. Age status of pilgrims in the sample collections.

the social status of pilgrims is often not indicated in miracle stories, children from both aristocratic and poor backgrounds are represented. They are generally described as suffering from the same types of ailments as adults, such as blindness, mutism and various crippling deformities. A notable exception is found in the miracles of Thomas Becket which depict a realistic range of medieval childhood accidents in accounts of children allegedly brought back from the dead by St Thomas. Many of these children are said to have drowned, and one baby is described as having been crushed in its cradle by a collapsed wall.¹⁷

Childhood is the age which seems to have attracted the most attention from scholars examining miracle accounts.¹⁸ However, these studies tend to focus on the social realities of pilgrimage, and few give much thought to hagiographical representations of children. In the medieval ecclesiastical mind, childhood was the ‘age of innocence’, a belief underscored by Isidore of Seville’s etymological explanation of *pueritia* as meaning ‘purity’. Echoing the gospel sentiment that little children (*parvuli*) would be saved because of their simplicity and innocence, one ‘little boy’ (*puerulus*) in the miracle narratives is said to have been cured because of these very qualities.¹⁹ It is striking that children in these stories are depicted as models of goodness and blameless victims of misfortune. Childhood infirmities, for example, are sometimes attributed to the actions of sinful parents, with one guilt-ridden pair even shown taking monastic vows to atone for their children’s disabilities.²⁰

¹⁷ For drowning, see William of Canterbury, *Miracula S. Thomae Cantuariensis*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. James C. Robertson. Rolls Series 67. 7 vols. (London: Longman and Co., 1876–85), 1: 200–2, 202–3, 207, 232–4, 258–61, 344, 346–7, 366. The story of the collapsed wall can be found in Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula S. Thomae Cantuariensis*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket ...*, ed. Robertson, 2: 252–3.

¹⁸ Most notably Finucane, *Rescue of the Innocents*. Also see Gordon, ‘Child Health’; Theilmann, ‘English Peasants’, 297–8; Edward James, ‘Childhood and Youth in the Early Middle Ages’, in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2004), 11–23.

¹⁹ Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:13–16. Frideswide, 582.

²⁰ Æbbe, 52–4.

However, children in the stories often seem to be little more than agents of parental anguish, rather than sufferers in their own right. This is especially evident in the Becket miracles, where the focus of attention is often less on the distress felt by children and more on the emotional response of the parents. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that young children are given something of a bland and androgynous persona by hagiographers. In notable contrast to some other medieval sources, gender differentiation in young children is kept to a minimum, making it difficult to discern how childhood differed for boys and girls in twelfth-century England.

Youth: adolescentia and juvenus

Medieval individuals who had transcended *pueritia*, but who were not yet considered full adults, found themselves in the 'mid-life' stages known as *adolescentia* (adolescence) and *juvenus* (youth). In medieval literature, this transitional period was the time of roaming and romance. In homiletic texts it was equated with impetuosity, immorality and danger. In hagiography it was often associated with religious conversion. All these aspects are evident in miracle narratives of twelfth-century England.

Adolescentia, in the ages-of-man schema, extended from the age of consent to the early 20s. Isidore gives the age of 21.²¹ In the sources under review, males are shown engaging in typically adolescent activities such as apple-picking with friends, and carelessly gorging on food.²² For girls in the Middle Ages, *adolescentia* was often considered the prime of life, as represented by the church's heroines: in hagiography by the teenage virgin martyr, and in art by the idealised beauty of the Virgin Mary.²³ It is tempting to speculate whether some young women of twelfth-century England, falling short of these flawless physical ideals, visited healing shrines in the hope of improving their marriage prospects. Evidence from the miracle narratives suggests this is a possibility. Although the sources record a large number of disfiguring medical conditions for all pilgrims, illnesses such as leprosy, dropsy, scrofula and various swelling ailments are particularly prominent for women in this age group.²⁴ However, it has also been suggested that the aristocracy were reluctant to publicly display their physical defects,²⁵ and an alternative to pilgrimage for wealthy unmarried girls is suggested in an Erkenwald miracle where the lame daughter of a London citizen is not expected to marry so is placed in a nearby nunnery.²⁶

Adolescentia was followed by *juvenus*. Although, in Isidore's scheme, 'youth' was a time of maturity ending at 50, the concept of *juvenus* seems to have changed slightly in the High Middle Ages with social practice shifting, as highlighted by Georges Duby. By the late eleventh century the *juvenis* was deemed to be a biologically mature individual who had not yet progressed into what might be considered full social adulthood with its attendant responsibilities. For both men and women, the end of *juvenus* usually entailed graduating from natal to marital kinship groups through marriage, although evidence from the late Middle Ages suggests that this simple transition from daughter to wife was often more an ideal projected by the clergy than

²¹ For age definitions see Shahar, *Childhood*, 27–8.

²² For example, Æbbe, 50 and Æbbe, 34–6.

²³ Kim M. Phillips, 'Maidenhood as the Perfect Age of Woman's Life', in *Young Medieval Women*, ed. Katherine J. Lewis, Noël J. Menuge and Kim M. Phillips (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 1–24.

²⁴ For example, Frideswide, 575–6, 585–6; Gilbert, 330; Milburga, 568; William, 253–4.

²⁵ Finucane, *Miracles*, 149–50; Sharon Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris: Gender, Ideology, and the Daily Lives of the Poor* (London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 53–5.

²⁶ Erkenwald, 160.

social reality for women in non-elite classes.²⁷ Nonetheless, the age of *juventus* is not easy to categorise, and is often used analogously with the term *adolescentia* by modern commentators.²⁸

In the Middle Ages, *juventus* had a variety of ambivalent characteristics, particularly for males. As *adolescentia* was imagined to embody female perfection, so *juventus* was hailed as the peak age for men.²⁹ This is reflected in twelfth-century miracle narratives by the common motif of robust, good-looking youths in their prime tragically losing their health and looks, such as the Oxford student whose outstandingly elegant form is said to be wasted by fever.³⁰ However, social deviance and hot-headedness are the more usual features of this male age group in the sources: impetuosity, blood-lust and greed often seem to lead the youthful astray. This undesirable side of medieval youth culture appears to be a particular feature of the noble and knightly classes. One young nobleman, 'burning with youth' (*juvenili fervore*), is said to have set fire to a church and murdered its peasant occupants in a vendetta against his brother. He 'feared neither God nor man' (*deum et homines non reveretur*), reported the hagiographer, echoing the sentiments behind the religious 'Peace' movements of the previous century which had attempted to protect the Church and the poor by curbing the violent tendencies of lawless young men like the one in the story.³¹ Like many other *juvenes* in the narratives, he is depicted arriving at a saint's shrine as a judicial penitent, sentenced to exile and pilgrimage by the ecclesiastical authorities.³² Other vagaries of youth are less serious and are put down to carelessness. 'Youthful frivolity' (*juvenili levitate*) is said to have caused a Coventry rider to be thrown from his horse, and flirting with a girl nearly proves fatal in another story in which an amorous youth accidentally swallows a brooch pin.³³ Wayward youths in the stories also include members of religious orders, such as the doubting novice saved from apostasy by a demonic visitation.³⁴

Although 36 male *juvenes* are recorded in the sources under analysis, locating women in this category is less easy. *Juvenulae* are only mentioned seven times and some are also referred to as *puellae* (girls), *virgines* (virgins) and *mulieres* (women).³⁵ Although the belligerency of male youth does not seem to have been shared by women of the same age group, it is interesting to note that the concept of burning, lustful youth is not limited to male stories. A young woman,

²⁷ Georges Duby, *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 112–13; David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 108. For single women, see Sharon Farmer, "'It Is Not Good That [Wo]man Should Be Alone": Elite Responses to Singlewomen in High Medieval Paris', in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250–1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 82–105; Beattie, *Medieval Single Women*.

²⁸ See, for example, Phillips, 'Maidenhood', 1–24; Goodich, *Birth to Old Age*, 105–41. The blurring of these terms stretches back to patristic writings. Mary Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 20; Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 15; Augusto Frascchetti, 'Roman Youth', in *A History of Young People in the West*, vol. 1, *Ancient and Medieval Rites of Passage*, ed. Giovanni Levi and Jean-Claude Schmitt, trans. Camille Naish (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 64.

²⁹ Phillips, 'Maidenhood', 3.

³⁰ Frideswide, 579.

³¹ William, 233. For the Peace of God see, for example, T. Head and R. Landes, eds., *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France Around the Year 1000* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

³² For other examples of judicial penitents see, for example, Aldhelm, 634–6; Dunstan, 166; Modwenna, 216–18; Ivo, lxvii–lxviii.

³³ Ivo, lxiii; Modwenna, 200.

³⁴ Ivo, lxxiv. For the theme of 'soul-sickness' of youth, see Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, new ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 262–7.

³⁵ Frideswide, 569–70, 578–9; Godric, 403, 440; Ivo, lxxvi–lxxvii; Milburga, 568; William, 74.

‘fired by the heat of her youthful age’ (*juvenilis aetatis ignita calore*) is described being tempted by the sexual charms of a fellow pilgrim, a sin which necessitates a swift reprimand from St Frideswide.³⁶ Although youth was evidently seen as a feverish, perilous time for both men and women in the narratives, for the latter the dangers are exclusively described in terms of sexual temptation.

Perhaps the most notable characteristic of ‘youth’ in the sources under review is that it seems to be mainly a male phenomenon (Figure 1). This might be accounted for in a number of ways. First, in the upper social classes where women married young and men might have a long wait to attain full manhood, there was obviously going to be a gender imbalance in this life-stage group. The celebrated twelfth-century knight, William Marshal, would have been classed as a *juvenis* until his marriage at 45, for example.³⁷ While men may have enjoyed a protracted youth, women would normally hope to marry in their adolescent years.³⁸ Second, it has been argued that young men were more likely to have the opportunity, and perhaps the need – due to their active lifestyles – to go on pilgrimage.³⁹ However, a third possibility is that these age categories of youth were essentially male in the Middle Ages, giving rise to a different kind of vocabulary for women. Indeed, the most widely used alternative for young unmarried women in the sources is *virgo*, as discussed below. Conceptually, as perhaps in real life, young women in these stories were essentially virgins, girls, wives and mothers, and only had a fleeting acquaintance with their ‘youthful’ personas.

Old age: seniores and senectus

Adulthood – as a life-cycle phase between youth (*juventus*) and what was considered as the first stage of old age (*seniores*) – was not a concept recognised by Isidore of Seville. In the Isidorean scheme youth was followed directly by *seniores* (between 50 and 70 years) and *senectus* (70 until death). Although late medieval records often indicated old age in persons over 60,⁴⁰ it has also been remarked that old age was a subjective concept in the medieval period, dependent on physical appearance and general debility rather than on calendar years.⁴¹ This claim seems to be supported in the miracle narratives where terminology specifically denoting this age phase is absent. Moreover, the notion that ageing had more to do with physical deterioration than with the passage of time is particularly notable for women, with examples of sick young women described as aging prematurely.⁴²

³⁶ Frideswide, 578.

³⁷ Duby, *Chivalrous Society*, 113. For another example, see William M. Aird, ‘Frustrated Masculinity: the Relationship between William the Conqueror and His Eldest Son’, in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dawn M. Hadley (London: Longman, 1999), 39–55.

³⁸ Indeed, many modern historians assume that there was no upper category in this life phase for women, with ‘maidenhood’ concluding in the late teens or mid-twenties with marriage. See, Phillips, ‘Maidenhood’, 4. David Herlihy postulates that urban and noble girls would have married even earlier, typically in the mid to late teens. Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 103–7.

³⁹ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: a History of Women in the Middle Ages.*, trans. C. Galai (London: Routledge, 1990), 140; Duby, *Chivalrous Society*, 113, 120. Late medieval inquisitions *post mortem* also indicate that ‘pilgrimage was a young man’s game’, with half of all references to English pilgrimages pertaining to men between the ages of 25 and 34. Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, 189.

⁴⁰ Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, trans. Yael Lotan (London: Routledge, 1997), 28–9.

⁴¹ Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bind: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 228; Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Oxford: Polity, 1989), 207.

⁴² For example, in the case of a leprous girl. Milburga, 569.

Of all the life phases, old age is the one most likely directly to affect a pilgrim's ability or need to go on pilgrimage. The physical limitations associated with old age must have made many longer pilgrimages undesirable, if not impossible. In late medieval documents, old age is given by women as a reason to commute pilgrimages for less physically demanding charitable activities.⁴³ An analogy can be found in twelfth-century miracle narratives: the Becket collection recounts that Emeline of Chaumont protested that she was too old to travel overseas to Canterbury.⁴⁴ However, it could also be argued that old age might create the opportunity and desire for pilgrimage, as those in the autumn of their lives were more likely than most to have both the time, and the medical reasons, to visit a curative shrine. In this respect, it is interesting to note that nearly half of cure-seeking, elderly pilgrims in the English narratives are suffering from some kind of visual impairment: traditionally an affliction of old age and one which did not necessarily impede an individual's mobility.⁴⁵

Late medieval literature reveals that advancing age did not always prohibit women from long and potentially dangerous religious excursions. The indefatigable Margery Kempe was still travelling around Europe well into her 60s, and the Dominican travel writer, Felix Fabri, praised the vigour and fortitude of a group of ladies, 'well-stricken in years', travelling by sea to Jerusalem.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, there are only nine obviously aged pilgrims in the miracle narratives under review, totalling less than 1% of the adult pilgrimage traffic described (Figure 1). There are two possible reasons for this dearth of evidence. Either there were virtually no older pilgrims visiting English shrines for the reasons described above, or elderly individuals were not especially distinguished from the general population in the hagiographical accounts.

George Minois' *History of Old Age* suggests that the latter may have been the case. Minois found that the aged were generally absent from sources of the period, leading to the conclusion that adulthood and old age were 'indistinguishable' in the twelfth century.⁴⁷ It may also have been that old age – with its attendant problems – was considered an incurable condition and a natural process with which one did not bother a saint. This can be illustrated by an episode related by Bernard of Angers, in the early eleventh century, in which a rheumatic, old woman (*vetula*) at St Foy's shrine was ridiculed by other pilgrims for wasting celestial time: time which, they complained, could have been better served directed towards the more deserving young.⁴⁸ Although St Foy takes pity on the pilgrim, the point is made that saints were primarily in the habit of curing the youthful. Diseased young bodies represented an inversion of the natural order, a wrong to be corrected, whereas old age was supposed to be tolerated as part of the human condition.

With respect to attitudes towards the elderly, medieval sources generally seem to reflect the Greco-Roman ambivalence that old age represented physical and mental decline on the one hand, but maturity and wisdom on the other.⁴⁹ This paradox is also evident in miracle stories, but in this case it is linked to gender. Old age, for women, seems to be a matter of bodily deterioration. Elderly women – identified by the nouns *anus* ('old woman') and *anícula* ('little, old

⁴³ Dispensations from vows of pilgrimage are edited and translated in Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage*. For age dispensations, see 103, 178, 190–1.

⁴⁴ William of Canterbury, *Miracula*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket ...*, ed. Robertson, 1: 451.

⁴⁵ Dunstan, 164; Frideswide, 570; Ithamar, 429–30, 431. For diseases of old age, see Luke Demaitre, 'The Care and Extension of Old Age in Medieval Medicine', in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 10–11.

⁴⁶ Felix Fabri, *A Brief Description of Brother Felix Fabri's First Journey to the Holy Land*, trans. Aubrey Steward (London: Palestine Text Society, 1896), 11, 26.

⁴⁷ Minois, *Old Age*, 114, 140, 142, 190. Also Shahar, *Growing Old*, 60.

⁴⁸ A. Bouillet, ed., *Liber miraculorum sancte Fidis* (Paris: A. Picard, 1897), 122.

⁴⁹ For Greek and Roman attitudes, see Minois, *Old Age*, 43–112; for medieval attitudes, 120–9, 162–5, and Shahar, *Growing Old*, 4.

woman') – are depicted as sickly and feeble, and are often the objects of pity. In one instance, in which an elderly woman is described as a *prestigiatrix* (a practitioner of magic) and *sortilega* (sorcerer), female old age is even linked to sin in a combination suggestive of later popular images of witches.⁵⁰ Elderly men, however, are described a little differently. Gone are the age-related epithets (there are no male equivalents of *anus*, *anicula* or *vetula*), and advanced stages of life are associated with maturity, primacy and respect.⁵¹ Thus, the age of one priest, older (*senior*) than his fellow monks, seems to indicate his ranking within the monastery rather than his decrepitude, and the elderly status of a knight is only referred to as it gives weight to the credibility of his testimony.⁵² Another knight, said to be a nonagenarian, was particularly admired for travelling from Brittany to Canterbury at his time of life.⁵³ These are venerable men cast in the heroic-warrior mould.⁵⁴ Old age, for these pilgrims, is represented as a positive, social condition. Old age, for women in the same texts, is essentially a physiological one.

Female old age is not, however, always as negative a concept in the stories as the above might imply. In a heart-warming story from the Becket miracles, Oda of Flanders and Matilda of Artois are said to have braved the perils of a lengthy pilgrimage to Canterbury, despite illness and advanced age.⁵⁵ In another story, an elderly woman is shown struggling to Canterbury, bowed under the weight of her son. He was reputedly so heavy that two fit men could barely lift him when they offered to help the following day.⁵⁶ The message in these accounts is clear: the physical feebleness of old women can be heroically overcome by faith. Although *anilitas* (old age) in the modern, biological sense seems to be a specifically feminine issue, it was one which hagiographers occasionally turned to their advantage to illustrate that even the most physically weak could be spiritually strong.

Life cycle

In her 1995 book, *Medieval Women: a Social History of Women in England 450–1500*, Henrietta Leyser classified laywomen not in terms of their age, but according to their 'family roles' and 'sexual status': namely, virginity, marriage, motherhood and widowhood.⁵⁷ These four socio-biological life-cycle phases are usually presumed to constitute the main ways in which women in the West were perceived – both by others and by themselves – in the Middle Ages.⁵⁸ Although, as husbands and fathers, men can technically be counted within this scheme, men were rarely referred to as virgins and widowers in contemporary sources, making virginity and widowhood largely female conditions.

Although essentially socio-biological, virginity, marriage, motherhood and widowhood also had spiritual relevance. Jerome (347–420) had equated a woman's marital/sexual status with

⁵⁰ William, 283.

⁵¹ These positive masculine connotations are also present in Old English. Amos Crandell Amos, 'Old English Words for Old', in *Aging and the Aged*, ed. Sheehan, 95–106.

⁵² Ithamar, 431; James, 18–19. For the elderly as witnesses, see Shahar, *Growing Old*, 82–6.

⁵³ Frideswide, 570.

⁵⁴ See Minois, *Old Age*, 45–6, 134, 189.

⁵⁵ William of Canterbury, *Miracula*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket ...*, ed. Robertson, 1: 266–7.

⁵⁶ William of Canterbury, *Miracula*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket ...*, ed. Robertson, 1: 188–9.

⁵⁷ Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: a Social History of Women in England 450–1500* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1997), 93.

⁵⁸ Frascchetti, 'Roman Youth', 63–4; Jennifer Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 7.

degrees of holiness,⁵⁹ and widows were numbered among the Church's *miserabiles personae*, supposedly eliciting special consideration and protection.⁶⁰ By the twelfth century, hagiography had provided women with a range of Christian role models in the form of virgin saints, Mary the *mater dolorosa*, and various pious chaste wives and widows. Whereas 'ages-of-man' terminology is mainly suggestive of women's roles and identities in secular society, the 'life-cycle' model may have more to tell us about religious attitudes towards women. Determining whether virgins or widows, for example, are presented as ordinary pilgrims, moral exemplars or as pious stereotypes provides valuable insight not just into the perceived function of women in medieval society, but also into the role of women pilgrims within the miracle genre itself.

Virginité

Of the four female 'sexual' life-phases, virginity was the one with the strongest religious overtones in the Middle Ages. Although in the lay world virginity referred to a biological statement of fact,⁶¹ it was also considered a spiritual condition of purity. A survey of *virgines* in miracle narratives must therefore take account of these two forms of virginity – the 'lay' and the 'spiritual' – and ask whether the word *virgo* was used as a general term for unmarried women, or whether it denoted 'special case' women. Moreover, because virginity – in both its secular and spiritual aspects – was often imagined as a precarious condition and one not conducive to contact with the wider world, a second line of enquiry might consider the realities of, and hagiographical attitudes towards, the appropriateness of pilgrimage for women at this stage of life.

A quick glance at the sources under review immediately reveals that virginity was not regarded as a bar to pilgrimage in twelfth-century England: references to virgins outnumber those of *adolescentulae* and *juvenculae* put together (compare Figures 1 and 2). However, the term *virgo* is by no means universally applied: a quarter of these examples can be found in the miracle collections for Frideswide and William of Norwich, and 10 hagiographers do not use the word at all.⁶²

Hagiographers suggest that a virgin could be a member of any young age group: a *puella*, a *juvencula* or someone who was 'practically an adult'.⁶³ What she was not, of course, was married. In 11 stories there seems to be nothing particularly noteworthy about the *virgo*: she suffers from the same kind of ailments, and is given the same narrative treatment, as any other young woman or girl. Neither are these virgins obviously from any particular social background. It may be that, to some hagiographers, the word *virgo* was simply an alternative form of *puella* or *adolescentia*.

Nonetheless, there are five instances in which *virgines* are clearly depicted as something more than ordinary young women. In two of these, parallels are made between the *virgo* pilgrim and the virgin saints – Æbbe and Milburga respectively – who come to their aid. The stories are

⁵⁹ Jerome, *Letter to Eustachium*, in *The Selected Letters of St Jerome*, ed. and trans. F.A. Wright (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 94 (22: 20).

⁶⁰ See James A. Brundage, 'Widows as Disadvantaged Persons in Medieval Canon Law', in *Upon my Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe*, ed. Louise Mirrer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 193–206.

⁶¹ For example, see Phillips, 'Four Virgins' Tales', 80–1.

⁶² For instances of *virgines*, see Æbbe, 32; Dunstan, 168; Edmund, 178–9; Frideswide, 571, 575–6, 583, 585 (twice), 585–6, 586; Milburga, 568; William, 74–7, 79, 208–9, 213–14, 253–5.

⁶³ Edmund, 178–9; Frideswide, 583; Milburga, 568; William 74–7; Frideswide, 571 ('virgo quaedam ... acetate quidem adulta').

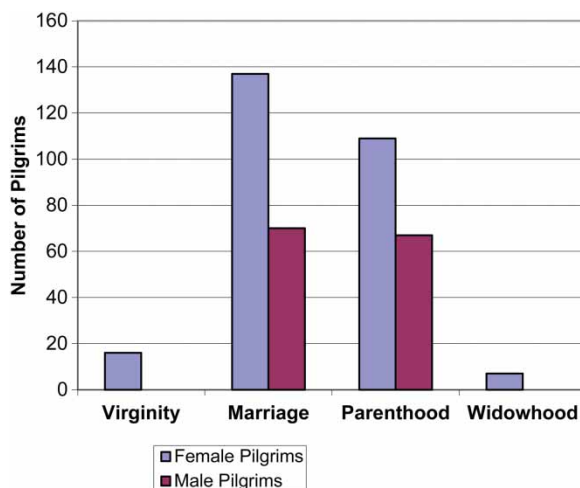


Figure 2. Life-cycle status of pilgrims in the sample collections.

Note: 42 men and 42 women were identified as both spouses and parents.

deliberately placed at the front of their respective collections because, as one author explained, it was appropriate that these saints began their posthumous careers by healing ‘simple and innocent virgins’ like themselves.⁶⁴ In these stories, virgin status is clearly largely symbolic.

Thomas of Monmouth, in his account of the miracles of St William of Norwich, is one of a handful of hagiographers who seems to have envisaged a distinction between *virgines* and more ordinary girls, since he includes in his collection some episodes which would not have been out of place in a saint’s *Life*. Two of these concern female visionaries who become the saint’s messengers, delivering instructions and prophetic foresights to the mortal world. Their virginity and piety made them worthy of such an honour, comments Thomas.⁶⁵ A third example interweaves hagiographical commonplace with the demon-lover topos. In this story Thomas recounts the tale of a devout and pious *virgo* who had vowed herself to a life of celibacy at an early age. Nonetheless, she finds herself harassed by persistent suitors, including a good-looking young man – interpreted as an incubus – who tries to tempt her with jewellery and fine clothes. Unable to rid their daughter of the evil presence, her parents finally take her to St William’s tomb where she is ‘cured’.⁶⁶ The theme of pious women tempted with jewellery and fine clothes is a recurrent motif in saints’ *Lives*, and a striking parallel can be found in the contemporary *Life* of Christina of Markyate.⁶⁷

The *virgo*, then, had a multitude of identities in twelfth-century miracle stories. Depending on the context, she might be an ordinary mortal, a pious prodigy or a symbol of spiritual idealism. However, in both its secular and spiritual forms, virginity is not represented as a condition which was supposed to deter women from pilgrimage. On the contrary, the virgin often seems to have been especially chosen for such a purpose, her purity and piety making her, in many ways, the model female pilgrim.

⁶⁴ Milburga, 570.

⁶⁵ William, 75; 213–14. The virgin-messenger is also a theme in William, 284–9.

⁶⁶ William, 79–85.

⁶⁷ C.H. Talbot, ed. and trans., *The Life of Christina of Markyate: a Twelfth-Century Recluse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 40–2. For the motif in earlier English examples, see Susan Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 83–4.

Marriage

Just under one third of adult females in the narratives under review are depicted, or recorded, as married. The majority of wives are identified by the presence, or mention, of a husband. Although hagiographers do not generally identify women according to their married status, there are some collections in which the label *uxor* (wife) is adopted in the format 'X wife of Y', resulting in married women having a greater visibility than their male counterparts whose marital status is not recorded in the same way.⁶⁸

How free were English married women to travel in the twelfth century? The answer clearly depends on a woman's social status and the length of her journey. For wives from well-to-do families wishing to travel some distance, it seems that they would have been constrained not only by domestic responsibilities, but also by their restricted legal rights. A wife wishing to go on pilgrimage was obliged to obtain the consent of her husband, under whose guardianship she was deemed to be.⁶⁹ Although, in theory, husbands and wives were equal in this respect, contemporary evidence demonstrates a gender bias. According to the chronicler Gerald of Wales, when Archbishop Baldwin warned a nobleman to consult his wife before taking the cross, the man retorted that there was 'no point in asking the advice of a woman'.⁷⁰ A wife's feelings are considered no more important in miracle stories: William, a knight of Earley, was instructed in a vision to go to St Thomas' shrine, 'whether it pleases your wife or not'.⁷¹ Wives, moreover, were economically tied to the home, having lost control of their property and chattels upon marriage.⁷² They were unable, for example, to alienate or lease land on their own account in order to raise capital: a major source of funding for aristocratic landholders planning a long-distance pilgrimage. A woman wishing to undertake pilgrimage was, therefore, reliant not only on her husband's goodwill, but also on his willingness to finance the project.

These aspects of marriage are occasionally seen as barriers even to local pilgrimage in miracle stories, with finance foremost in the minds of non-consenting husbands. Thus the stepfather of a crippled boy is depicted rebuking his wife for 'squandering' (*dissipare*) his 'wealth' (*bona sua*) in carrying her invalid son to Sempringham, and forbids her to repeat the exercise.⁷³ In another collection, a London citizen refuses to allow his devout wife to take a monetary donation to St Erkenwald.⁷⁴ Not all accounts show husbands being difficult. Another woman similarly devoted to her chosen saint is given her husband's blessing to take her offering to William of Norwich. However, in this instance the husband is described as a wealthy knight, and presumably the donation would have been no financial hardship.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ For example, the Godric collection uses a formula which typically notes a husband's name and origin (e.g. 'Mathildis uxor Ulfkilli de Hervertune': Godric, 374), and the *Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich* often add a husband's occupational details (for example, 'Ida uxor Eustachii monetarii Norwicensis': William, 154–5).

⁶⁹ In 1190 this restriction was formalised in law in the Council of Westminster. Webb, 'Women Pilgrims', 22. Also see Shahar, *Fourth Estate*, 92–3; Judith Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 105–10.

⁷⁰ 'Non est expetendum consilium muliebre': Gerald of Wales, *Itinerarium Cambriae*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. J.S. Brewer, J.F. Dimock and G.F. Warner. Rolls Series 21. 8 vols. (London: Longman, Green; 1861–91), 6: 49. For a similar example, see Ivo of Chartres, Letter 245, in *Sancti Ivonis Carnotensis episcopi, Opera omnia: epistolae*, ed. J.-P. Migne. Patrologia cursus completus, series Latina, 162 (Paris: Garnier Fratres et J.-P. Migne Successores, 1889), col. 251.

⁷¹ 'Placeat displiceatve uxori tuae.' Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket ...*, ed. Robertson, 2: 101.

⁷² Bennett, *Women in the Medieval Countryside*, 35, 110–14.

⁷³ Gilbert, 328–30.

⁷⁴ Erkenwald, 132–4.

⁷⁵ William, 195.

The large number of wives depicted on pilgrimage in the narratives (Figure 2) indicates that, by and large, married women from different backgrounds found the ways and means to leave their homes and travel. Some apparently covered long distances on their journeys, and a great many appear to have travelled without their husbands.⁷⁶ The most autonomous of all wives in the stories are those depicted in the miracles of William of Norwich. The wife of Walter Flotberd, for example, is described managing her own travel arrangements which include a river passage from Yarmouth to Norwich and accommodation at an inn (*hospitium*).⁷⁷ Botilda, wife of the monks' cook at Norwich, not only leaves her husband behind for a trip to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, but also averts shipwreck on the homeward voyage by single-handedly organising a prayer session among her fellow pilgrims.⁷⁸ The most feisty of these East Anglian wives is the redoubtable Wimarc, a merchant's wife who apparently engineered an ingenious escape from captivity by poisoning her pirate gaolers with toxic toads. After miraculously surviving her own poisoning, Wimarc is described travelling to Rome to report her adventures to the pope.⁷⁹ These wives, then, were far more than 'supporting characters', in contrast to the conclusion reached by Kathleen Kirk in her analysis of contemporary female pilgrims in Normandy.⁸⁰ Hagiographers of English collections often presented wives as strong, capable women, and pilgrims in their own right, who generally found marriage no bar to pilgrimage.

Although often headstrong and independent, these women could also be stalwarts of family life. Time and again wives are shown being supportive, protective and resilient in times of trouble. Almost half of all identified wives in the stories are described making a pilgrimage for the sake of others, acting as carers for sick or disabled family members. Moreover, there are no bad wives in the manner of later *fabliaux* literature and sermon *exempla*.⁸¹ These married ladies usually appear as paragons of virtue.

There are, on the contrary, plenty of bad husbands with whom wives have to contend. This they seem to do with remarkable tolerance and an extraordinary sense of dignity. In unhappy circumstances women are depicted behaving impeccably while their husbands are, without exception, represented as the villains of the piece. Women who suffer at the hands of cruel or unfaithful husbands in the stories include two said to have been poisoned by their husbands' jealous mistresses, and four repudiated wives.⁸² Women are shown being abandoned by their husbands mainly as a consequence of their medical conditions: disabilities bring marital discord. In an account where a husband is shown deserting his crippled wife due to the added crisis of penury, the hagiographer has much to say about the faithless man who neglects his marital responsibilities in difficult times.⁸³

Even when treated badly, wives are usually represented as unerringly faithful and constant. A popular motif in miracle collections is the wife thwarted from a pious act by a godless husband. It is interesting that, despite the evident wrongness of the husbands' behaviour from a religious perspective, the husband's authority is rarely shown as being directly

⁷⁶ Only 32 female pilgrims are recorded travelling in the company of husbands, and the majority of these are accompanying a sick child to a shrine. It is likely that many more wives travelled with their husbands, but these were not recorded by hagiographers.

⁷⁷ William, 151.

⁷⁸ William, 178–81. This is normally a male motif in miracle collections.

⁷⁹ William, 246–50.

⁸⁰ Quirk, 'Men, Women and Miracles', 54.

⁸¹ By the twelfth century the 'wicked wife' topos was used to support clerical attacks against women. Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women: a Topos in Medieval Art and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 2–40.

⁸² Godric, 391, Frideswide, 575; Aldhem, 648–50; Frideswide, 574, 586; Ivo, lxix.

⁸³ Aldhem, 648–50.

undermined. In an Erkenwald miracle, a wife obeying the wishes of her husband in staying at home is vindicated by divine intervention. Not only is her obstinate husband struck down with a nasty humoral complaint but, ironically, his wife is called upon to lead him to the shrine for a cure.⁸⁴ In other stories wives find subtle ways around their husbands' demands without resorting to outright rebellion. Thus, forbidden to take her son on pilgrimage, one wife is depicted winning her husband round by means of faith and subtle persuasion.⁸⁵ This is very much in keeping with the idea that wives, with their intercessory skills, were agents of religious conversion in the Middle Ages.⁸⁶

One type of wife notably absent in the narratives is the pious, chaste wife of hagiography. While female saints may have relinquished their marriage beds for the love of Christ, women in miracle accounts seem securely rooted in secular reality, albeit a slightly idealised one. The typical wife is a moral and domestic *exemplum* more than a spiritual one, and wives are generally shown ably balancing the demands of religious and marital duties. If, as seems likely, miracle narratives promoted ideal Christian behaviour to the laity,⁸⁷ the intention of authors was evidently not to dissuade women from their marital responsibilities, but to encourage wives in them. It is thus pertinent that one repudiated wife was rewarded for her long years of chastity not with a religious vocation but with the return of her errant spouse.⁸⁸

Motherhood

A fourteenth-century papal mandate exempting an Englishwoman from carrying out her pilgrimage vow to go to Santiago de Compostela cites, as a reason for the dispensation, her 'number of children'.⁸⁹ It may be presumed that this lady, burdened with an impossibly huge brood, was unable to either leave her offspring at home or to take them with her on pilgrimage. Other late medieval dispensations also imply that motherhood was a full-time business, and perhaps not conducive to long-distance pilgrimage.⁹⁰

In all probability, motherhood and long-distance travel were not as incompatible in the Middle Ages as we might imagine, and not least because families were smaller than historians once supposed.⁹¹ Miracle narratives are not all that forthcoming on family size. Perhaps due to literary economy, it is rare to see a mother in the company of children other than the one brought to our attention as the subject of a miraculous cure. However, larger families are occasionally alluded to in hard-luck cases, implying that five or six children was indeed considered an above-average number.⁹² Hagiographers also occasionally draw our attention to an only child, explaining that it was particularly treasured.⁹³ Single children, however, are clearly exceptions,

⁸⁴ Erkenwald, 132–4.

⁸⁵ Gilbert, 330.

⁸⁶ Sharon Farmer, 'Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives', *Speculum* 61 (1986): 517–43.

⁸⁷ For the idea that miracle collections promulgated religious and moral ideals, see Gabriela Signori, 'The Miracle Kitchen and its Ingredients: a Methodical and Critical Approach to Marian Shrine Wonders (10th to 13th century)', *Hagiographica* 3 (1996), 277–303.

⁸⁸ Aldhelm, 650.

⁸⁹ Trans. in Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage*, 190–1.

⁹⁰ Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage*, 103, 104.

⁹¹ The average number of living children in the peasantry is said to be two or three. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bind*, 95; Bennett, *Women in the Medieval Countryside*, 60. The same average is also given for baronial and knightly families in the twelfth century. Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (London: Yale University Press, 2001), 55.

⁹² Æbbe, 54 (six children); Frideswide, 574 (five children); William, 167 (six sons).

⁹³ For example, Swithun, 658.

suggesting that the average number of children in a twelfth-century English family lay somewhere between these extremes of one and six, as social historians now acknowledge.

Writers of miracle stories seem keen to demonstrate that pilgrimage and motherhood were entirely compatible: in the sources under review, almost a quarter of adult female pilgrims are shown to be mothers. Indeed, as recognised by scholarship, motherhood appears as a major impetus in miracle stories, with childhood illnesses and accidents fairly high on the list of women's motivations.⁹⁴ Mothers span a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and travel a range of distances. However, mothers were not always depicted travelling with their offspring. Unlike her fourteenth-century counterparts mentioned at the start of this section, Botilda of Norwich seems to have found motherhood no obstacle when she wished to sail to visit St James' shrine at Compostela: she simply left her children behind. The journey to Compostela and back, via St Gilles in Languedoc-Roussillon, would have taken Botilda away for up to six months.⁹⁵ Warned in a vision that her six-year-old son had become ill in her absence, she is said to have rushed home to his aid.

Despite Botilda's long absence from home, her son's illness is not presented as a divine reprimand for bad parenting. There are, in fact, few bad mothers in the sources.⁹⁶ Women are generally depicted as model examples of medieval motherhood: tender, loving, compassionate and solicitous for the welfare of their offspring. Although fathers are also sympathetically portrayed, mothers differ from them in two distinct ways. First, there are more of them: where a child is accompanied by just one parent, that parent is twice as likely to be the mother.⁹⁷ This maternal bias has been noted by other scholars, and is consistent with the opinion that medieval mothers played a greater part in their children's lives than did fathers.⁹⁸ Second, motherhood is often depicted as a more deep-seated, emotional condition than fatherhood.⁹⁹ This is illustrated by the mother who cried more copiously than the father for her son, because 'she loved him more tenderly'.¹⁰⁰ Feats of maternal love are also occasionally shown as heroic, as in the example of the mother who endured the long journey to Canterbury, despite fainting nine times on the way.¹⁰¹

Motherhood differs from virginity and marriage in the narratives insofar as the term *mater* is rarely used as an identification tag. With the exception of the occasional use of the status-bearing term *materfamilias*, shrine registrars evidently did not consider it necessary to note a woman's

⁹⁴ For some of this scholarship see, for example, Morrison, *Women Pilgrims*, 3–42; Craig, *Wandering Women*, 92–8; Kathleen Quirk, 'Men, Women and Miracles', 53–71.

⁹⁵ William, 178–81. Journey times to Compostela are discussed in Robert B. Tate, *Pilgrimages to St James of Compostela from the British Isles During the Middle Ages* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1990), 4, 8, 11; and in Wendy R. Childs, 'The Perils, or Otherwise, of Maritime Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in the Fifteenth Century', in *Pilgrimage Explored*, ed. Jennie Stopford (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 1999), 129.

⁹⁶ The only exception is the stepmother in James, 14–15. For the theme of bad mothers, see, for example, Danièle Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages*, trans. Jody Gladding (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 56–8.

⁹⁷ Twenty-three pilgrims are recorded travelling with their mothers, 11 with fathers. Children travelling with mothers are especially prominent in the Godric collection: see, for example, Godric, 406, 411 (twice), 416, 417, 426, 442, 475.

⁹⁸ Finucane, *Rescue of Innocents*, 99; Shahar, *Fourth Estate*, 141.

⁹⁹ For this observation in the context of the miracle genre, see Quirk, 'Men, Women and Miracles', 55.

¹⁰⁰ 'Mater, quae tenerius diligebat, uberius': Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket ...*, ed. Robertson, 2: 94. For this theme, see Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages*, 58.

¹⁰¹ William of Canterbury, *Miracula*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket ...*, ed. Robertson, 1: 162.

status as a parent. Thus a blind woman at St Æbbe's oratory, accompanied by her daughter, is introduced as a *mulier*, not as a mother.¹⁰² Mothers invariably only come to light when they appear alongside their children in the stories. For this reason it is impossible to estimate how many female pilgrims recorded in the sources were mothers. However, it may be guessed that the majority of adult women who visited a saint's shrine were mothers of children who were either present but unrecorded, or who were left at home, like Botilda's son, in the care of others.

Widowhood

The term *vidua* (widow), as with that of *virgo*, is exclusively applied to women in twelfth-century miracle collections. If widowers were among the adult male pilgrims in these sources, they were indistinguishable from other adult men. This is partly because medieval men were not usually identified by their sexual status, and partly because widows – like virgins – were the focus of special attention by the Church. As *miserabiles personae*, widows were supposed to elicit sympathy and charity, and were protected under canon law.¹⁰³ Widowhood, however, differed from virginity in that the secular world tended towards a more prosaic view of the former condition. Although the Church upheld the sanctity of widowhood,¹⁰⁴ the clichéd widow of secular literature was worldly and lustful, much like Chaucer's five-times-widowed Wife of Bath who famously enjoyed a good pilgrimage.¹⁰⁵

Turning from literature to social reality, widowhood is thought to have been 'common' for medieval women, with widowed women often outnumbering widowed men at any one time.¹⁰⁶ Whether or not this gender bias is reflected in miracle narratives would, of course, depend on a widow's ability and desire to travel on pilgrimage. It is often assumed that numerous women took the opportunity to undertake pilgrimage after their husband's death, either to pray for their husband's soul or to take advantage of their new-found independence.¹⁰⁷ However, it may also have been the case that many widows were restricted by new-found social and familial responsibilities.¹⁰⁸ Widowhood seems to have been a condition not only of ambivalent attitudes, but also of problematic social and economic realities in the Central and Late Middle Ages.

Despite the widow's importance within the *miserabiles personae* tradition, surprisingly few widows can be identified in the narratives under review (Figure 2). Although William of Malmesbury tells us that St Aldhelm was reputedly famed for favouring widows, he records the

¹⁰² Æbbe, 32–4.

¹⁰³ See note 60 above. Widows were also protected under English common law: see Henry Mayr-Harting, 'Twelfth-Century English Mothers', in *Motherhood, Religion and Society in Medieval Europe, 400–1400: Essays Presented to Henrietta Leyser*, ed. Conrad Leyser and Lesley Smith (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 108–28.

¹⁰⁴ Ideally the widow was not supposed to remarry. See James A. Brundage, 'Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Classical Canon Law', in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 17–31.

¹⁰⁵ For negative stereotypes of widowhood, see H.M. Arden, 'Grief, Widowhood and Women's Sexuality in Medieval French Literature', in *Upon My Husband's Death*, ed. Mirrer, 305–19. Translations of later medieval *fabliaux* incorporating the wicked widow motif can be found in Alcuin Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 133–4, 185, 187–8.

¹⁰⁶ Barbara Hanawalt, 'Remarriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Late Medieval England', in *Wife and Widow*, ed. Sheridan Walker, 146; Judith Bennett, 'Widows in the Medieval English Countryside', in *Upon My Husband's Death*, ed. Mirrer, 71–2; Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 107–11.

¹⁰⁷ Diana Webb, 'Freedom of Movement? Women Travellers in the Middle Ages', in *Pawns or players? Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women*, ed. Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 78.

¹⁰⁸ Bennett, 'Widows', 69–127.

cure of just one.¹⁰⁹ Altogether, there are only six stories featuring a total of seven widowed female pilgrims. Although it is possible that widows did not travel – non-pilgrim widows in the narratives are equally rare – a more likely explanation for the ‘missing’ widows is that medieval scribes did not find it necessary to categorise women by their widowed status, a phenomenon Judith Bennett noted in the legal records pertaining to Brigstock manor in the fourteenth century.¹¹⁰

Despite the difficulties with identifying widows, miracle stories have much to tell social historians about the relationship between pilgrimage and widowhood. A Becket miracle, for example, provides a purely secular motive for a widow’s pilgrimage when St Thomas is described coming to the aid of a woman in legal dispute with her stepson over her dower.¹¹¹ Perhaps the most interesting widow is Quinciana whose life story is narrated by a monk of Coldingham in the miracles of St Æbbe. Having lost her husband and sons in Henry II’s Welsh campaigns, Quinciana, we learn, is plunged into poverty. Now a poor widow, and freed of her domestic and familial responsibilities, she undertakes a pilgrimage around the shrines of England and France to seek a cure for a long-standing affliction. Quinciana is depicted as a true *miserabilis persona* saved, by the grace of God, from destitution, misery and despair.¹¹²

Elsewhere in the narratives widows become special exemplars, either because of their great faith or simply because, as widows, they were deemed suitable vehicles for demonstrating God’s compassion. Just as some hagiographers headed their collections with stories of praise-worthy virgins, so William of Malmesbury begins his with an account of a blind widow. ‘With exemplary faith’ (*insigni fide*), she heroically pushes her way through the crowds at a consecration ceremony in a Somerset church, certain that St Aldhelm would cure her if she reached the altar.¹¹³ In one miracle story ‘widowhood’ is not a secular condition imposed upon women by the death of a spouse, but a religious professional choice. The miracles of St Æthelthryth relate the tale of a blind woman who, on being repudiated by her husband, makes an oath to remain single. Finally cured by St Ivo, she becomes a vowess, remaining – in the words of the author – ‘in widowhood’ (*in viduitate*).¹¹⁴

Conclusion

In *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, Diana Webb confidently asserted that miracle stories ‘bring us face to face with pilgrims’, and this article has tackled the question of what sort of individuals these pilgrims were.¹¹⁵ Looking specifically at women recorded in miracle narratives from twelfth-century England, female pilgrims have been surveyed within two common frameworks of medieval collective identity, namely, the six ‘ages of man’, and the four familial/sexual life-cycle phases of women. This approach has offered new social and cultural insights into the lives of, and attitudes towards, women who travelled on pilgrimage in England during this period. However, it has also highlighted the difficulties involved with applying sociological analysis to medieval hagiographical texts, particularly with a view to gaining an idea of the proportions of different types of women recorded at English shrines.

¹⁰⁹ Aldhelm, 572.

¹¹⁰ Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, 72–3.

¹¹¹ Benedict of Peterborough, *Miracula*, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket ...*, ed. Robertson, 2: 248.

¹¹² Æbbe, 40–4.

¹¹³ Aldhelm, 572.

¹¹⁴ Ivo, lxix.

¹¹⁵ Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, 181.

Perhaps most problematic in this respect is that so few of the 1027 pilgrims studied for this survey can be placed within either of the two age-related schemes. The Isidorean ‘ages of man’ has proved the more difficult fit, for both men and women; less than a quarter of pilgrims in the sources can be classified within one of the six ages. Despite hagiographers’ claims that all ages were involved in pilgrimage,¹¹⁶ there is a relative lack of evidence for the very young and the very old, and the use of ages-of-man terminology is patchy and sometimes inconsistent in the sources. The biggest problem with the ages-of-man model, however, is that an adult phase between youth (*juventus*) and what was considered as the first stage of old age (*seniores*) was not recognised. Although the classical world used particular vocabulary to distinguish this ‘stepping-stone’ phase of life, this terminology seems to have been disregarded by the medieval period,¹¹⁷ and the majority of adults in twelfth-century miracle stories are referred to in other ways. Some are given descriptive terms (for example, ‘a blind man’, ‘a crippled woman’, ‘a pauper’), or occupational titles (‘a priest’, ‘a peasant’, ‘a weaver’). The term most frequently given to adult females is *mulier*.¹¹⁸

The ages-of-man scheme presents special problems for women. Although the same classificatory terminology is attributed to both men and women in miracle narratives, it was applied less frequently, and sometimes less rigorously, to female pilgrims. Perhaps more problematically, only a very small number of women come to light in the adolescent, youth and old age categories (Figure 1). This may well be the result of fewer women in these age groups travelling on pilgrimage. However, the relative popularity of an alternative nomenclature, *virgo*, for many young women suggests another possibility: that medieval women were more readily associated with a slightly different life-phase terminology. If women are considered in what might be thought of as their most typical medieval roles, as virgins, wives, mothers and widows, within this ‘woman-friendly’ schema we see women not only in greater numbers, but also at their most idealised (Figure 3).

Overall, the most prominent female pilgrims in the sources are wives, mothers and children (Figures 1 and 2). However, it is important to stress that this is not necessarily due to the popularity of twelfth-century pilgrimage with these particular groups. Children’s high visibility can be explained by the fact that childhood is the only age which is universally distinguished from others in the narratives. Moreover, the majority of parents come to light through their association with children, which accounts for the large number of mothers. The same type of argument can be made for wives who are identified through their relationships with their husbands in the stories. Since narrative context and familial relationships are less relevant for other female categories such as virginity, widowhood and old age, it seems likely that these types of womanhood often remain hidden, and perhaps only become visible when they are intrinsic to a particular story.

The failure of miracle narratives to present us with a clear overall picture of female pilgrimage serves to remind us of the limitations of hagiography as a historical source: a fact often overlooked by social historians attempting to reconstruct cultic communities from this type of historical text. It also sheds doubt on some commonly held beliefs about women taken from miracle evidence, such as the emphasis put on mothers and children visiting saints’ shrines. Perhaps more significantly, a reappraisal of this sociological approach has opened up another line of historical enquiry, enabling us to discover a female pilgrimage discourse which has hitherto remained hidden, or at

¹¹⁶ This topos occurs in Erkenwald, 108; Milburga, 570; Swithun, 662.

¹¹⁷ Dove, *Perfect Age*, 39; Goodich, *Birth to Old Age*, 143–6.

¹¹⁸ Over a quarter of female adults are described as *mulier*. However, the word *mulier* does not seem to have been age-specific since it spans the ‘youth’ and ‘old age’ categories as well.

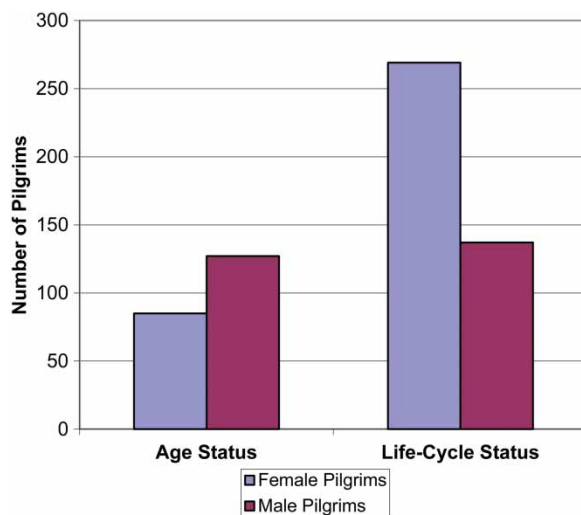


Figure 3. Age and life-cycle comparisons of pilgrims in the sample collections.

least purposely ‘minimised’ by historians eschewing ‘ideologically charged issues’.¹¹⁹ This is not to argue that miracle collections have little to offer medieval historians in the way of social history, only that they additionally reveal much else. In particular, this article has shown how hagiographers reconstructed recognised categories of female identity in order to present contemporary audiences with an ideological, but socially acceptable, template for female pilgrimage.

With the possible exception of childhood, all the categories considered in the study are associated with conventional feminine characteristics. However, stereotypes of womanhood in the sources seem to be unusually complex, and can be broadly divided into two types: the ‘secular’, suggesting moral exemplars, and the ‘religious’, indicating pious, spiritual ones. The secular model is represented, on the one hand, by the perfect wives and mothers who steadfastly remain perfect wives and mothers throughout their trials and tribulations, and on the other hand by the occasional cases of women demonstrating the sinful side of female youth and old age. The spiritual model is typified by the pious virgins, widows and courageous old women whose weakness, humility and great faith give them a certain heroic stature. Although wives and mothers firmly adhere to the secular model and virgins often veer off into what might be imagined as hagiographical stereotypes, many female age phases – most notably virginity, widowhood and old age – convey aspects of both. This intersection of secular and religious values is especially striking, suggesting a form of narrative writing situated somewhere between the saint’s *Life*, the monastic chronicle and *exempla* literature, three medieval genres with which miracle stories are most often associated.¹²⁰

Finally, these hagiographical descriptions allow us to re-evaluate the role of miracle narratives in medieval society and the stories’ intended audience, questions which are still open to debate

¹¹⁹ See note 8 above.

¹²⁰ Posthumous miracles are often appended to saints’ *Lives*, and miracle collections frequently occur within monastic chronicles as, for example, for Ely: E.O. Blake, ed., *Liber Eliensis*. Camden, 3rd series, 92 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1962). For the link between miracle stories and *exempla*, see Michael Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders: the Development of the Concept of Miracle, 1150–1350* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 34–5.

and speculation. Although some miracle narratives may have been intended primarily for monastic reading,¹²¹ it is also recognised that many were disseminated to lay audiences, perhaps through oral exposition by shrine custodians or through vernacular sermons.¹²² It is probable that, among their many functions, the stories promoted pilgrimage and promulgated ideal Christian behaviour, and this article has suggested that they delivered subtle messages to lay audiences in their descriptions of women. In this respect, stereotypes of womanhood seem to offer something for everyone, presenting lay audiences with a range of aspirational models within the context of a recognisable social reality. Perhaps most notably, piety and familial duty seldom conflict as they do in other hagiographical sources such as saints' *Lives*. In combining secular and spiritual themes, the stories instead demonstrate how women can be good Christians and, at the same time, good wives, mothers or other female bastions of the social order.

More particularly, of course, miracle narratives also inform female audiences how to be good pilgrims, a rare perspective in view of the mountain of literature produced throughout the Middle Ages which voiced negative, and often derisory, opinions about female pilgrimage.¹²³ In promoting their cults, hagiographers in high-medieval England communicated a very different ideological message. Miracle narratives clearly announce that pilgrimage was a suitable and, indeed, an advantageous activity for women at all times of life.

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¹²¹ For example, this is the contention of Rachel Koopmans for Becket's miracles. Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 130–3.

¹²² See, for example, Webb, *Pilgrimage*, 18; Yarrow, *Saints*, 7; Finucane, *Miracles*, 158–9; Ward, *Miracles*, 146.

¹²³ For this theme from Late Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages, see Craig, *Wandering Women*, 21–78. Also Webb, 'Women Pilgrims'.

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