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CHAPTER SIX

Sex, Marriage and Motherhood

Sexual Debates

Medieval women were classified according to their sexual status: men might be thought of collectively as knights, merchants, crusaders; women were virgins, wives or widows. They were also, of course, mothers. A professed reason for showing respect to women was indeed that everyone – Christ included – had come into the world through a woman. Those who chose to eschew marriage and motherhood in order to enter the religious life as virgins were always a tiny minority; they will be the subject of a later chapter. Our concern here is with women who married and had children.

However varied the experience of such women, however irrecoverable their personal voices, the meaning, morality and nature of their lives was a topic of ever-changing complexity and debate. How to understand woman's particular physiology, how to reconcile the alleged demands of her nature with Christian teaching, these were matters not simply of academic interest, but of everyday urgency. In the late twelfth century, for example, questions like the following were being asked in learned circles in Northern Europe:

some-one's wife has been ruptured in the navel through repeated child-birth. The doctors tell her that if she gives birth again she will die. Nevertheless her husband asks her for the debt [debt here means the marriage debt, i.e. sex]. Is she bound to render it, since she knows for certain that she will die if she conceives? She knows that if she renders the debt she will conceive, because she is still young. Item, one asks if she can procure sterility for herself not principally in order to impede child-birth but in order not to die in child-birth.

This particular conundrum, recently discussed by Peter Biller in *Woman is a Worthy Wight*,¹ was set by Peter the Chanter of Paris. Peter in turn was master to Chobham, sub-dean of Salisbury Cathedral and the author of an influential manual designed to give guidance to English priests in the exercise of their parochial duties. It is a manual to which we shall have reason to return; but for now let us examine the overlapping and at times conflicting worlds in which the putative woman with the ruptured navel found herself.

The medieval Church, or so it is often claimed, believed that the best way of dealing with sex was to give it up; only minimal investigation will reveal that its teaching on the subject was considerably more complex. Sexual intercourse as such was not the problem; it was a part of God's original plan. Although Adam and Eve did not have sex in the Garden of Eden, this was simply because they had not, as things turned out, had time for it; if they had not sinned by eating the apple – a sin of pride – they would necessarily have had intercourse – there would otherwise have been no way they could have obeyed God's order to 'increase and multiply' (Genesis 1: 27–8). They could not have chosen to be virgins in paradise or they would have been guilty of thwarting God's intentions. The causes of the Fall and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden had, then, nothing to do with sex. The problem was that after the Fall sex was no longer possible, as it would have been in paradise, without the disturbing accompaniment of lust. As the thirteenth-century theologian, Peter Lombard, explained:

if the first humans had not sinned there would have been carnal union in Paradise without any sin or stain and there would have been an 'undefiled bed' (Hebrews 13: 4) there and union without concupiscence. Furthermore, they would have commanded the genital organs like other organs, so they would not have felt any unlawful movement there. Just as we move some bodily members towards others, such as the hand to the mouth, without the ardour of lust, likewise they would have used the genital organs without any itching of the flesh.²

Post-lapsarian lust, the result of sin, was therefore what

¹ P. Biller, 'Marriage Patterns and Women's Lives: A Sketch of Pastoral Geography', in P. J. P. Goldberg (ed.), *Woman is a Worthy Wight* (1992), p. 75.

² Peter Lombard, cited in P. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (1993), pp. 24–5.

caused sex to be so troublesome; such lust, unless rigorously controlled, could lead the unwary to eternal damnation. Only one legitimate outlet for sex was possible, and that was marriage. Views on the moral quality of married sexual activity might and did vary but there could be no doubt that marriage had been ordained by God (in contrast to monasticism which, as was sometimes pointed out, had been instituted by man) and that sex was its expected component. Even the rigorists adhered to the theory of mutual conjugal debt as defined by St Paul:

Let the husband render to his wife what is her due, and likewise the wife to her husband. A wife has no authority over her body but her husband; likewise, the husband has no authority over his body but his wife. You must not refuse each other except perhaps by consent for a time, that you may give yourself to prayer and return together again lest Satan tempt you because you lack self-control. (I Corinthians 7: 3–6)

This is the 'debt' to which Peter the Chanter was referring. But Peter, as we have seen, was concerned also with the competing authority of the physician; the physician, in the case quoted, being the one who is urging restraint. The Church in the Middle Ages had never held a monopoly on discussions of sexual lore; there had always been a separate tradition derived from Greek medical schools and subsequently enriched by Arabic learning. Given their wholly different bases, the medical and ecclesiastical worlds could and did at times collide (for example, on the propriety of dissecting bodies), although for the most part they lived amicably side by side. To the late-twentieth-century reader it may come as something of a surprise to learn that the putting of a plaster of hemlock on the testicles before coitus was recommended as a form of birth control; even more surprising that this advice comes from a best-selling book, *The Treasure of the Poor*, written by the future Pope John XXI.³ (We might note that today such contradictions tend to centre around the subject of food rather than sex: any woman's magazine is likely to contain dietary advice followed by recipes which conform to none of the recommended rules.) In any discussion of sex and marriage there is of course that most unfathomable world of all, the world of practice. What notice, if any, did men and women take either of their doctors

³ J. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* (1991), p. 138.

or their priests? How far did their theories influence behaviour? Before we can even begin to consider such questions we will need to look more closely both at prevailing theories of physiology and at theological teaching on marriage. For university men of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries these were matters of paramount interest.

Medical theories about sexual difference were themselves by no means uniform. There were two chief schools of thought. The earliest, following Galen, advocated a female anatomy which corresponded with that of a man. The newer one, based on Aristotle, saw women as defective males: the parts that were outside in a man were inside in a woman. For the Galenists, both men and women produced seed, whereas on an Aristotelian understanding of reproduction women provided no more than 'matter for the semen to work upon'. Galen's views, however 'egalitarian' they might seem, had a double edge. On the one hand, a woman had to ejaculate her seed in order for there to be conception, and this she could not do without enjoying the act of intercourse; on the other hand, it then became impossible for a woman who had been raped and who became pregnant to reclaim.

There was also, despite the seeming symmetry of Galenist theory, a considerable difference in its teaching on the nature of male and female seed. Male seed was precious; it must be neither unreasonably stored up nor prodigally wasted. Female seed, on the other hand, was potentially lethal. Women needed regularly to purge themselves of their bodily excesses. Menstruation was a part of this process; so was intercourse; in cases of necessity, masturbation was recommended to avoid the dangers of stored-up seed. Such seed could lead to a condition of varying degrees of seriousness known as 'uterine suffocation'. The woman thus afflicted would have difficulty in breathing, she would have convulsions and fainting fits and she might go mad. John of Gaddesden, of the Faculty of Medicine at Oxford University in the fourteenth century, had this advice to give:

If the suffocation comes from a retention of the sperm, the woman should get together with and draw up a marriage contract with some man. If she does not or cannot do this, because she is a nun and it is forbidden by her monastic vow or because she is married to an old man incapable of giving her her due, she should travel overseas, take frequent exercise and use medicine which will dry up the sperm ... If

she has a fainting fit, the midwife should insert a finger covered with oil of lily, laurel or spikenard into her womb and move it vigorously about.⁴

Absent from Galen's thought but none the less of lasting influence throughout the Middle Ages was the quite separate tradition, put to pernicious use in the hands of misogynists, that women's seed, and more especially menstrual blood, were dangerous not only to women, but to everything else as well. As recorded by Pliny in his *Natural History*, contact with menstrual blood turned new wine sour, crops touched by it became barren and fruit fell from trees, hives of bees died, dogs who tasted it got rabies. Such lore, combined with Old Testament taboos, led to the strict insistence that intercourse during menstruation was to be avoided at all costs; any child so conceived was likely to have red hair and to contract leprosy. The mere gaze of a menstruating woman might have dire consequences; children in their cradles could be poisoned by the glance of an old woman who still had her periods, the logic being that the retention of her menses gave her poisonous vapours let off through her eyes.

Just as longevituous as classical superstitions about menstruation was the teaching of Hippocratic theory, inherited from Greece, of the four humours; this too could be given a misogynistic slant. According to Hippocratic thinking, the world must be understood as divided into four elements: fire, air, earth and water. To these corresponded three categories: first: heat, cold, dryness and moisture; second, the bodily humours: blood, yellow bile or choler, black bile and phlegm; third, the temperaments: sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic and melancholic. Health was a matter of achieving the correct humoral balance. Men and women were basically different: men were hotter and drier than women, which accounted for their physiological and moral superiority. Women's lack of heat accounted both for physical weakness and for their slippery and untrustworthy nature. It also helped to explain why women were sexually much greedier than men: cold uteruses were ever in need of being warmed up by hot semen.

Misogynistic interpretations were never, however, the whole

⁴ Cited in D. Jacquart and C. Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (1988), p. 176.

story. Even as wild claims for the damaging effects of menstruating women were being disseminated through late-thirteenth-century tracts, so too discussions were afoot as to whether or not the Virgin had menstruated; the consensus was that she had. Our concern now must be to try and determine how far such mixed messages on their sexual nature affected 'actual' women. What relevance, if any, did the classroom discussions of celibate males have for women in medieval England? Let us start with medicine.

Difficult though it is to know how women interpreted or internalised scholastic traditions, we have in the writings of Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1178), abbess of the Rhenish foundation of Rupertsberg, a rare example of a woman who combined traditional teaching on women's nature with an understanding of humoral theory in such a way that perceived weaknesses became strengths; thus it was to her own 'airiness' as a woman that Hildegard attributed her receptivity to the wind of the Holy Spirit. Other women of lesser literary brilliance may have done likewise. We do not know. Nor, it must be admitted, do we have much evidence for the dissemination in medieval England of Hildegard's medical writings other than a copy owned by John Erghome (d. c.1385), prior of an Augustinian friary at York, but her reputation as a visionary was certainly well known.⁵ On the other hand it would be a mistake to imagine that for an abbess to be interested in medicine was in itself unusual. Equally, we have only the sparsest evidence for women doctors in medieval England but this includes the knowledge that at the convent of Wherwell in Hampshire in the mid-thirteenth century, the abbess Euphemia practised medicine.

Abbess Euphemia may, or may not, have limited her expertise to the treatment of other women. Meagre though the evidence is of female medical practice it is clear that women healers, and not only nuns, did sometimes attend men: female skills in nursing sick heroes were a commonplace in romance – examples can be found in *Tristan*, *Silence* and *Guigemar* – and they were also an actuality. Monica Green, for example, has found a 'wise woman' (*vetula*) in attendance at the Anglo-Norman court. Conversely, as Green has also demonstrated, women's health in the Middle Ages must not be understood

simply as 'women's business'.⁶ Firstly, not all women's health problems were of gynaecological origin; the much vaunted reason for assuming female care – modesty – would thus in a number of conditions have been of limited relevance. Secondly, while a woman in labour might indeed be attended by another woman, her midwife, this in itself did not preclude male interest in gynaecology.

The legend of a supposed 'woman's world' of medicine, debarred to men, centres around the figure of Trota of Salerno. Trota has suffered the extremes of fame; on the one hand, she has been denied historicity – Salerno is recognised without hesitation as the eleventh-century centre for the transmission of Greek medical learning to the West but the idea that there was a place there for a woman physician has been ridiculed; on the other hand, Trota has been accredited with works she never wrote. A definitive study of the 'Trotula' treatises by Monica Green is to appear shortly. What is already clear from the work of both Green and John Benton is that, ironically, the one authentic work of Trota's, *The Practice According to Trota*, was little known in Europe and never translated into any vernacular. The three treatises attributed to her, on the other hand, were widely circulated and in use up until the sixteenth century. According to Green, at least three dozen copies of Latin 'Trotula' texts and three Anglo-Norman translations as well as Middle English versions were in use in England for the treatment of women. These repay attention.

The most popular, known as Translation A, of which there are five extant copies, draws in the main on two of the 'Trotula' texts; it also includes extracts from the *Gynaecia* of Muscio, a work of gynaecology based on the writings of the second-century Greek physician Soranus of Ephesus, of considerable interest for its instructions for normal delivery and for malpresentations. To these texts Middle English authors added variations of their own. Alexandra Barratt has edited an illustrative passage in *Women's Writing in Middle English*. As an important *apologia* for the work, this merits an extensive quotation and the following sample, loosely rendered into modern English, will give an idea of its character:

Our Lord God when he had established the world with all creatures, he

⁵ I owe the reference to John Erghome to Monica Green.

⁶ M. Green, 'Women's medical practice and health care in medieval Europe', in J. Bennett et al. (eds), *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages* (1989), pp. 39–78.

made man and woman as rational creatures, and bade them grow and multiply, and ordered that from these two should come the third. And he ordered that of the man, that is made of hot and dry matter, should come the seed and that the woman that is made of cold matter and moist should receive the seed so that by the balance of hot and cold, moist and dry, the child should be conceived, just as we see trees, corn and herbs may not grow without the right balance of the four elements.

And in as far as women are by nature more weak and cold than men and have great travail in child-birth they often suffer from a greater variety of illnesses than do men, particularly in those parts of the body that appertain to conception. Wherefore for the worship of Our Lady and of all the saints, my intention was to try diligently to translate from Latin and French into English various causes of their maladies, the signs that you will know them by, the cures that will help them following the treatises of various masters that have translated them from Greek into Latin. And because women of our tongue can better read and understand this language than any other and every literate woman may read it to any who is illiterate and help her and advise her in her maladies without showing her disease to any man I have composed and written this in English.

And if any man chances to read it I pray him and charge him on Our Lady's behalf that he read it not in any way that would show contempt or be slanderous of any woman, nor for any reason except their healing and help, dreading the vengeance that might fall to him as it has done to others that have revealed women's secrets in a slanderous fashion; certainly understanding that those women who are now alive have troubles no different from those once endured by women who now are saints in heaven.

Just as the maker of all things ordered trees to flourish and flower and afterwards to bring forth fruit, in the same way he has ordained to all women a purgation which is called flowers (i.e. menstrual flow) without which no child may be engendered or conceived ... Just as pollution (i.e. nocturnal emissions) purge excess humours from a man so do the flowers for a woman.⁷

The author continues with a description of the physical differences between men and women and with instructions on how to conceive male as opposed to female children – or indeed vice versa. What is clearly remarkable, as Alexandra Barratt has pointed out, is the sympathy shown towards women.⁸ There is no suggestion in the story of the Creation of any blameworthy behaviour on the part of the first woman

⁷ A. Barratt (ed.), *Women's Writing in Middle English* (1992), pp. 29–31. My translation.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

nor of her as a secondary creation, a kind of afterthought on God's part. Genesis has been blended with humoral theory to produce an origin story free from any hint of misogyny. Similarly, at the end of the passage quoted, menstruation is mentioned as part of the natural order of things. There is no evidence here of any of the dangers associated with menstrual blood, as we have seen described by Pliny and borrowed from him by later writers, nor any intimation that women's physiology bears the stain of original sin; the special problems of women have been shared by the saints in heaven, surely an invitation, if not a theological *sequitur*, to regard them as free from impurity.

We will return to the author of Translation A after considering briefly some of the remaining 'Trotula' treatises and related Middle English texts. 'Trotula' Translation B claims for its cures the authority of Galen and Hippocrates. Unlike 'Trotula A' it contains no special address to women; possibly it was owned by a male physician. What makes it distinctive is its inclusion of a number of cosmetic recipes, for hair and face, for example, as well as the advice that, before sexual intercourse, a woman should rub her breast, nipples and genitals with a powder made of dried roses, cloves, nutmeg, galangale and laurel. A recipe is provided for constricting her vagina if she is trying to give a false impression of being a virgin. The contents of 'Trotula C', also known as *The Book of Rota*, include a diagnostic test for infertility, to be used by both men and women, as well as advice on a whole range of matters, such as talking in one's sleep. But much better known than any of these 'Trotula' texts was a quite separate compilation, *The Sickness of Women*.

The Sickness of Women is based not, in the first instance, on Salernitan works but on a Latin medical textbook of the thirteenth century compiled by Gilbert the Englishman. It circulated in England in both a shorter and a longer version. The longer version includes a little of Muscio's *Gynaecia* together with illustrations designed to help midwives correct the position of the infant at the start of labour.

Taken together, these texts show, on the one hand, the persistence of medical lore handed down from Late Antiquity, on the other its constant adaptation. The Middle English manuscripts were copied as working texts, not as compilations of antiquarian interest. However bizarre some of the recipes

may sound, there is evidence of their being both tried and tested. New herbs are added; case histories are recited. A late-twentieth-century audience, aware again of the claims of aromatherapy and alternative medicine, may be less sceptical than earlier generations about the recommended herbal baths and the plant remedies proposed. Other advice seems neither more nor less than common sense. On failure to menstruate, for example, *The Sickness of Women* comments:

But if this illness is a result of anger or sorrow, cause her to be cheerful, give her refreshing food and drink, and get her used to bathing sometimes. And if it is the result of too much fasting or overwakefulness, see that she eats good food and drink which will give her good blood and get her to enjoy herself and be happy and give up gloomy thought.⁹

Whatever the merits of the advice given in *The Sickness of Women* it is far from clear whether we are still dealing with a world of women's medicine as adumbrated in 'Trotula A'. As Green has pointed out, of the 'Trotula' texts which we have considered only 'Trotula A' and *The Book of Rota* contain any suggestion – other than in conventional prologues closely modelled on Latin sources – of having been written for a specifically female audience. Thus, while 'Trotula A' regularly gives advice in the second person, and so in one manuscript does the author of *The Book of Rota*, the shorter version of *The Sickness of Women* addresses its readers as 'Sirs'. Despite the available evidence of book ownership by women, including herbals and books of medicine, and of the relationship between women and vernacular texts (subjects to which we shall return), Green has not as yet been able to find a single specifically gynaecological manuscript owned by a woman. This is not in any way to underestimate the role of women midwives or the less prominent part played by women doctors and physicians; but it is to suggest, following Green, that women's fertility was considered too important to be left solely in their hands. What we make of this is another matter; whether, for example, we regard the Prior of Bermondsey's expertise in matters of haemorrhage of the womb (as reported in *The Sickness of Women*) as evidence of enlightenment on his part, or meddlesome curiosity, is an open question. What we clearly cannot count on is the sympathetic tone set by the author of

Translation A. Beryl Rowland cites prejudices which are likely to have been common: John of Mirfield (d. 1407), a doctor at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London, complained about 'worthless and presumptuous women who usurp this profession to themselves and abuse it; who, possessing neither natural ability nor professional knowledge, make the greatest possible mistakes (thanks to their stupidity) and very often kill their patients.'¹⁰

Women practitioners might be derided either for their general ignorance or for the limited field of their expertise. It should, however, be noted that this kind of criticism was primarily based on the new professionalism which university training gave doctors. When medical faculties were first set up in the mid-thirteenth century, women were excluded – as they were from any university education – but they continued to practise medicine, as did many laymen. Both came in for abuse. University-trained physicians and surgeons resented the continued esteem shown towards those who had not passed through the system. They poured scorn on healers, whether male or female, who were not, in their eyes, properly qualified and who might take away some of their business, undercutting their prices. Guy de Chauliac, a fourteenth-century surgeon whose work was translated into English, was equally scathing both about German knights who, he claimed, used stones and incantations to cure wounds, and about women and the unlettered whose medicine, he maintained, consisted of appeals to God and his saints.

Guy's lampoons raise the question as to how far 'textual' medicine conflicted, or tallied, with the admonitions and teachings of the Church. Did the one represent, as Guy seems to suggest, 'learned' medicine, while the other encouraged 'popular' cures? Professional jealousy apart, how big a gulf was there between hospital and Church? On one reading the medical and the ecclesiastical worlds are quite separate; in the medical texts there is not much room for magic. Mention of the healing qualities of certain stones or herbs – perhaps as used by Guy's German knights – is the only sign of any belief in the curative powers of supernatural properties. No invocations are included to make the recommended substances – balsam wood, aromatic calamus, spikenard, galingale, mastic,

⁹ B. Rowland (ed.), *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health* (1981), p. 71.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

saffron, pellitory – any more efficacious than they will be after the necessary cooking or pounding. On the other hand, the authors are on the whole on their guard to preserve ecclesiastical proprieties. In cases of ‘suffocation of the uterus’ it may, according to *The Sickness of Women*, be helpful to have sexual intercourse – ‘but understand what I have to say: the relations must be lawful such as with her husband and no other; for certainly it is better for man or woman to have the greatest physical illness while they live than to be healed through a deed of lechery or any other deed against God’s command.’¹¹

Likewise, in one of the ‘Trotula A’ texts, the scribe refuses to discuss contraception lest ‘some cursed kelots [loose women] would use it’. Abstinence was the only method he would advocate. A different manuscript contains plenty of recipes for contraceptives though a similar anxiety surfaces: ‘such things should not be known to young fools but only to save good and wise women from peril.’ Penitentials dealing with the same subject are, as one might expect, more rigorous; their concern not only with *coitus interruptus* but also with potions given or taken to prevent conception suggests that so-called ‘poisons of sterility’ were relatively easy to come by. In penitentials and medical texts alike, poverty is regarded as some kind of an excuse for the use of contraceptives. What none of the texts will condone is abortion; this is a practice proscribed in thirteenth-century England by both canon and civil law, though, given the choice in *The Sickness of Women* between the life of the child and the life of the mother, it is the mother who is to be saved.

We may still want to know to whom the women in medieval England in need of medical attention or advice on sexual or gynaecological matters would first have turned. Penitentials and medical texts may tell us of recommended practices or solutions which women should avoid, in short, what they should and should not do, but still leave us guessing as to what, in fact, they did.

It would be easy, but probably misleading, to assume that the kinds of treatment women followed depended on their class. Our evidence, incomplete though it is, suggests that women and indeed men of whatever station were catholic in their choice of palliatives. Stories of their recourse to holy men

and of visits to shrines help to suggest both the complex brew of remedies they tried as well as the wide social spectrum to which they belonged. A saint such as Hugh of Lincoln, for example, bishop from 1186 until his death in 1200, was faced with a fair share of cases of infertility, adultery and sexual harassment demanding miraculous intervention. One cure, of a woman allegedly molested ‘by a demon in the shape of a young man’, although attributed to the intervention of Hugh’s prayers was also, according to Hugh’s biographer, Adam of Eynsham, expedited by judicious use of the herb St John’s wort. Adam is anxious to justify such a prophylactic; since doctors consider the herb ‘a sovereign remedy against poison’, such as snake-bites, there is no reason why it should not also be effective ‘against the assault of the ancient Serpent’. ‘Nothing in the world,’ concludes Adam, ‘which can be hurt by the malice of the treacherous enemy has through the gracious mercy of our Saviour been left without an adequate remedy.’¹²

Many saints dispensed their favours reasonably equally between men and women; but occasionally saints with a marked penchant for one or other sex can be found. One such is the patron saint of Oxford, St Frideswide, whom Henry Mayr-Harting has shown to have been particularly adept at dealing with the problems of women.¹³ A new shrine was built for Frideswide in 1180; for the next decade pilgrims flocked to it. Among those said to have been cured was Beatrix from Wiltshire suffering from a two-year headache brought on after having had sex with her husband; Helen, also from Wiltshire, who could not sleep now that her lover-priest had given her up; Cecily from Oxfordshire whose neighbours suspected that her pregnancy was feigned. The young women who sought help were, Mayr-Harting has suggested, particularly troubled by the expectations roused by the Church’s new teaching on marriage in contrast to their experience of it. It is time to consider what this teaching was.

¹² Adam of Eynsham, *The Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. D. Douie and H. Farmer (1962), vol. 2, p. 123.

¹³ H. Mayr-Harting, ‘Functions of a Twelfth-Century Shrine: The Miracles of St Frideswide’, in H. Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore (eds), *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davis* (1985), pp. 193–206.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Marriage

Despite the fulminations of the early medieval church against unchristian sexual practices – concubinage, adultery, incest, to name only a few – it was not until the twelfth century that there was in place either a consistent theory of what made a marriage or a regularly used wedding liturgy. Only in the wake of the reforms of the Gregorian papacy did the Church turn its attention to the intensification of the Christian life of the laity and to a consideration of marriage as a sacrament rather than as a civil contract. But in its attempt to develop a new theology of marriage the Church remained faithful to, and indeed renewed, its commitment to the idea that what made a marriage was the consent of the couple: no more and no less. Debate in the mid-twelfth century centred on whether sexual intercourse was necessary to cement the alliance. In support of the traditional viewpoint the Bolognese lawyer Gratian argued that it was. In Paris, Peter Lombard and his school, proposing a new definition – and it was they who won the day – argued that it was not. (Otherwise, it was asked, how would it be possible to regard Mary and Joseph as married, given that Mary retained her virginity throughout her life?) To the Lombard school, an exchange of words of commitment was therefore all that was needed: the statements ‘I take you as my wife ... I take you as my husband’ in themselves had legal and sacramental force. But a promise to marry was another matter. In that case, there was no marriage unless the promise was followed by sex. Sex alone, or the promise alone, were not binding.

By its adherence to this ideology of consent the Church manoeuvred itself into a curious corner. Anxious on the one hand to promote the state of matrimony as ‘an excellent mystery’, to be likened, in the words of the Sarum liturgy, to the ‘sacramental and nuptial union betwixt Christ and Church’, it was on the other hand bound by its own logic to accept the validity of clandestine arrangements. Everything was done that could be done to urge that marriages be celebrated in church; that banns be read three times in order that the proposed marriage be made public and open to scrutiny; none the less, marriages contracted out of church and in secret still retained their legitimacy.

The theory of marriage as advocated by Peter Lombard was

finally accepted into the law of the church by Pope Alexander III (1159–81). It was left to his successor, Innocent III, to make the Church’s teaching on consanguinity and affinity more manageable by reducing the prohibited degrees from seven to four. Given that this new ruling had some chance of being observed it was imperative to Pope Innocent that it should be. In future, therefore, marriages were to be solemnised with proper publicity. Canon 51 of the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council lays out both the procedure to be followed and the logic behind it:

As the prohibition of marriage in the three remotest degrees is repealed, we wish it to be strictly observed in others. Hence, following in the steps of our predecessors, we absolutely prohibit clandestine marriages, forbidding also any priest to be present at such. For which reason we extend the particular custom of certain countries to countries generally, decreeing that when marriages are to be contracted they shall be published in the churches by the priests, a suitable period being fixed beforehand within which whoever wants and is able to may adduce a lawful impediment.

Henceforth, a marriage where all the formalities were observed might take the following course:

(i) Before betrothal, it was customary for the financial settlement to be agreed between the families of the bride and groom. A woman was expected to bring to her marriage a dowry which, in effect, represented her share of her family’s inheritance. There was an expectation, though it was no more than this, that the bride’s dowry would consist of goods and cash and that she in turn would be endowed with rights (dower rights) in her groom’s lands. Not infrequently, however, the bride’s dowry was made up of land which she might have inherited from her mother whose own dowry it had originally been. In a sense such land, which often lay separately from paternal holdings, can be seen as ‘woman’s land’, earmarked for use in the marriages of daughters or, if the need arose, of younger sons. In at least two passages, the twelfth-century legal text attributed to Bracton implies that families routinely used women’s land in this way. Odard of Bamburgh, for example, a twelfth-century sheriff of Northumberland, granted land to his daughter Gunhilda and her husband as a marriage portion; they gave the same land in marriage to their daughter Emma and her husband. It then descended to

Emma's heir, Christina, who gave it to her younger son, Simon.

Arrangements were not always so simple and the details of landed settlements could vary widely. In the case of 1288 from Baynards in Haddestone (Norfolk), examined by Elaine Clark,¹⁴ a father made over to his daughter and future spouse seven acres of arable land, two more of meadow and a messuage. In fact the father, who promised to support the couple at least until after their first harvest, was to enjoy the profits of this land until his death, when they were also to receive two horses and an oxen and a plough. In another case, at Horsham St Faith near Norwich in 1319, a father made over a third of nine acres and of two messuages to his daughter and her future spouse. They were to pay the entry fine for the land to the lord of the manor and technically, therefore, became the legal tenants; in fact the agreement was that the young couple would only have the use of two acres of arable and re-surrender the land to the father who would pay all rents and fulfil all tenurial obligations.

(ii) After agreeing the marriage settlement a betrothal ceremony could be held, probably before witnesses; depending on the exact words used (see below) this ceremony might or might not be considered binding. As far as the nobility were concerned betrothal ceremonies could be arranged early in life, at any time after children had reached seven years – the age of reason – but in such cases only the actual marriage, solemnised when the bride and the groom had come of age – at twelve and fourteen respectively – had the full force of law.

(iii) Before the marriage took place – and there were certain times of the year when marriages were not permitted, such as the weeks of Advent and Lent – banns were read out three times in church with at least a day between each reading to allow time for anyone to come forward with incriminating information that might invalidate the proposed union.

(iv) Bride and groom met at the church door for the wedding service. Here the groom made an announcement as to the dower his bride was to receive and gave her, arranged on a book or a shield, gold or silver as symbol of her dower and the ring that, once blessed and asperged, he would place on her finger. Vows in the vernacular were then exchanged:

¹⁴ E. Clark, 'The Decision to Marry in Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Century Norfolk', *Medieval Studies* 49 (1987), pp. 505–6.

although a wife was expected to obey her husband, the bride's vow of obedience to her husband was not introduced until the Reformation, in 1549.

(v) The couple now entered the church. Prayers and Mass followed and, after the Sanctus, the couple knelt (under a pall) for a further blessing on their marriage. According to a custom described by Grosseteste, a thirteenth-century Bishop of Lincoln, any children already born to the couple at this point gathered under the pall and thereby gained legitimacy (lawyers, it may be noted, thought otherwise).

(vi) The wedding feast followed. Depending on the couple's social position and on local custom this could be more or less obligatory and more or less expensive. The manorial court might fine a bridegroom for his failure to provide the expected festivities. In 1294, for example, at Wistow in Huntingdonshire:

Robert Juwel was convicted by jurors of this, that by custom he ought to have given a meal to all the servants of the Court of Wistow on the day when he married his wife, and he did not do so. Therefore he is in mercy for unjust detention, 12d pledge, Robert atte Broke. And by the same pledge he will satisfy the same servants of the aforesaid meal.¹⁵

Some feasts cost the father of the bride almost as much as the value of the dowry. A poor couple, on the other hand, might be treated to a bride-ale to which well-wishers brought not only their own food but also contributed money to help them set up house.

(vii) The priest blessed the bridal bedchamber and bed. Little is known about this final scene other than from literary texts such as Marie de France's *Le Fresne* which depends for its dénouement on the heroine preparing the bedchamber where the celebrant would bless the newlyweds 'for this was part of his duty'.¹⁶ However, there are hints that the practice was not just a feature of fiction: a Northamptonshire charter reveals a case where some of the dower was to be handed over only after the bride had been bedded.

Marriage liturgies had already been developed in Anglo-Norman circles in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. By the thirteenth century they were not then entirely unfamiliar; what was new, however, was the coherence of the doctrine behind

¹⁵ Cited G. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (1960), p. 173.

¹⁶ *Le Fresne*, trans. G. Burgess and K. Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France* (1986), p. 66.

them and the zealouslyness of the attempts to make the church the place in which to be married. What had once been private contracts were now to become public weddings. Within only a few years of Lateran IV there was English legislation to implement its decrees. Episcopal Statutes from Salisbury (1217 × 1219), whose provisions were to be repeated in the course of the century at Exeter, London and Durham, enjoined on parish priests the duty to check up on, and if necessary regularise, the union of parents presenting a child for baptism. From the mid-thirteenth century, directives for archidiaconal visitations make it clear that archdeacons too were now making it their business to investigate marriages that lay within their jurisdiction.

What, it might be asked was the problem? Nothing in the evidence we have suggests hostility to the new demands so much as indifference mixed with confusion. Marriages, traditionally, lacked precisely the formality which was now expected and, despite the efforts of bishops, archdeacons and priests, they continued to do so. Throughout the Middle Ages, couples married not just at the church door but all over the place, under trees, in fields, kitchens and inns. Here, for example, is a description of a marriage given by a witness in a court case heard in York in 1372:

One year ago on the feast of the apostles Philip and James just past, he was present in the house of William Burton, tanner of York, about the third hour past the ninth, when and where John Beke, saddler, sitting down on a bench in that house, called in English 'le Sidebyneke', called the said Marjory to him and said to her, 'Marjory, do you wish to be my wife?' And she replied, 'I will if you wish.' And taking at once the said Marjory's right hand, John said, 'Marjory, here I take you as my wife, for better or worse, to have and to hold until the end of my life; and of this I give you my faith.' The said Marjory replied to him, 'Here I take you John as my husband, to have and to hold until the end of my life and of this I give you my faith.' And then the said John kissed the said Marjory through a wreath of flowers, in English 'Garland'.¹⁷

Such marriages, it must be stressed, were not illegal. Considered and described by the Church as 'clandestine', it was bound paradoxically both to discourage and to support them. Deplorable as it might be to be married in an inn rather than at the church door, it was still a marriage. The cases that came

¹⁷ R. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (1974), pp. 28–9.

before episcopal and archidiaconal courts did so not because the marriages in question were clandestine but because they had become contentious for some other reason. In such cases the couple (where appropriate) were urged to regularise their union at a suitable time and place, but they were not penalised for having previously failed to do so. It was on the whole (though diocesan practice might vary) only those who tried to manipulate the new system to their advantage who were in danger of excommunication; these were the couples who knew there was some impediment to their proposed union and therefore chose, as a kind of cover, the respectability of a church wedding but in a parish other than their own where, it was hoped, there would be no knowing neighbours to betray their secret.

Cases such as these, which might sooner or later be brought to the attention of ecclesiastical courts, would be likely to include couples who had gone against the new rulings on affinity. Despite modification, these rulings could still prove onerous: it remained illegal to marry anyone with whom you shared a great-great-grandparent. Nor was it acceptable to sleep with a man and then decide that whom you really wanted to marry was his brother: sexual intercourse created bonds of consanguinity even if it did not make a marriage. On occasion, the rules of consanguinity could, of course, prove useful. The discovery of a previously unknown relationship could suffice to dissolve an unsatisfactory partnership or provide an excuse for breaking off negotiations which were in any case not going too well. Jeremy Goldberg cites the case of a certain Agnes who didn't think much of the man her parents hoped she would marry; asked for her objections she said she didn't like the way her prospective in-laws called her 'lass';¹⁸ a revelation of a sexual liaison between the man and a relative of Agnes was subsequently revealed and the whole match called off. None the less ecclesiastical courts were not overburdened by pleas of consanguinity despite the complexities which blood and sex could create. The bulk of the business of these courts was taken up with cases of bigamy.

The frequency of bigamy – or cases of 'pre-contract' – was in

¹⁸ P. J. P. Goldberg, '“For Better, For Worse”: Marriage and Economic Opportunity for Women in Town and Country', in P. J. P. Goldberg (ed.), *Woman is a Worthly Wight* (1992), p. 117.

itself a reflection of the difficulties which clandestine marriage could cause. Given the informality of so many arrangements, it was possible for there to be uncertainty as to whether a marriage had in fact taken place, either because there had been no witnesses or because the couple themselves might not understand the nature of the promises they had made. In the older view of marriage, as we have seen, both words and sex were necessary to make the match a legitimate union; according to the new theology, a promise with or without sex, if in the present tense, effected a binding sacrament. But it was not always clear, to the couples themselves, whether '*Volo te habere ...*', 'I wish to have you ...' was a promise, a statement of future intent or a description of present actions. There is evidence not only of genuine confusion about the difference between an engagement and a marriage but also that occasions could arise when it might be advantageous to play on the ambiguity of the situation. Some examples will illustrate both points.

John Astlott and Agnes Louth came before the court at York in 1422. John was a merchant and on one occasion when he was due to go abroad on business Agnes came to him to beg him to propose to her before he left; her father, she said, was nagging her. John duly turned up at Agnes's house with a goose, in the hope that it would put her father in a good mood, and they exchanged vows. Off went John on his journey – and he lost a lot of money, as a result of which Agnes no longer wanted to marry him when he came home. As John saw it, however, they were married already and so he took Agnes to court.

We do not know the outcome of this case, though we do know that the case of Isabelle Roll against John Bullock, heard at York over a period of three years, from 1351–5, divided the bench. John was alleged to have said to Isabelle, 'If I take any woman as my wife, I will take you' and they had slept together. But subsequently John had married someone else. Did John's condition amount to the same thing as a promise?

Claims of pre-contract not only gave rise to legal headaches – and sometimes parental wrath – they could also encourage corruption. Alice Palmer, unhappy with her marriage to Geoffrey Brown, gave Ralph Foulmer 5 shillings to testify that there was a previous arrangement between them. Geoffrey subsequently remarried but Alice, later regretting her action, in

1337 confessed what she had done and claimed her rights as his lawful wife. An example of a premeditated swindle is provided by the case of *Brok v. Nastok* which got as far as the king's court in 1290 and has been discussed by R. C. Palmer.¹⁹ Here was an instance of a couple, Edmund de Nastok and Elizabeth de Ludehale, who hoped to set up home together but, inhibited by poverty – or perhaps prompted by greed – they married clandestinely. Thereafter Edmund opened negotiations with Richard de Brok for the hand of his daughter, Agnes, and a dowry was agreed; it was to consist of six horses, ten oxen, twelve cows with calves, twelve steers with heifers, eighty ewes with lambs, twelve rams, thirteen pigs, ten quarters of wheat, eleven quarters of rye, twenty quarters of oats, three quarters of salt, a cape, two mantles, four robes, eighteen blankets, other clothes, cloth and towels and 100 shillings. All this was handed over to Edmund and he and Agnes subsequently married. At this point Elizabeth entered the picture with a plea of prior contract. The plea was heard in the ecclesiastical court and granted. Edmund and Elizabeth clearly thought they would be able to retain at least half of Agnes's dowry, though Edmund also tried to claim that the goods had not been part of the marriage contract. The plan misfired; the jury decided that Edmund was liable for the value of the dowry plus £16 in damages.

A rather different kind of case, but which also revolved around profit, arose in 1317 between Agnes Smith and John Toller. John had given Agnes 24 shillings if she would marry him. Agnes then discovered that John had previously slept with one of her kinswomen. On grounds of consanguinity the proposed marriage was called off and John asked for his money back. This was refused by Agnes on the grounds that part of the original bargain had been that it was hers to keep whatever the outcome.

Pre-contract might be the most usual grounds for dissolving a marriage but it was not the only one. Marriages that could be shown to have taken place under duress were deemed invalid, for there could then have been no true consent, the very essence of the union. But in such cases the complaint had to be speedily lodged for subsequent consummation or cohabitation might be deemed to have negated the original

¹⁹ R. C. Palmer, 'Contexts of Marriage in Medieval England', *Speculum* 59 (1984), pp. 42–67.

charge. The reality of the dangers posed by any threats was also an issue; thus the complaint of a young girl, told that she would be seized by the ears and thrown into a pool unless she agreed to a match, would be disregarded if it could be shown that there had been enough of a crowd present to have protected her. Cruelty subsequent to a marriage was not grounds for dissolution, though it could make possible a legal separation. Such cases rarely occurred – some would argue because the threshold for what constituted cruelty was by our standards low – but when they did, every effort was made to effect a reconciliation between the parties. The husband might sometimes, but not in all cases, be asked to give a pledge of his future good behaviour either in money or in goods or to find sureties who would guarantee it. In Canterbury, for example, in 1373 Thomas Waralynton appeared and was sworn to treat Matilda Trippes his wife with marital affection with respect to bed and table, and to furnish her with those things which are necessary in food and other materials according to his ability. And the woman was sworn to obey him as her husband.²⁰ At Lichfield, Staffordshire, in 1466, Helen Hyndman sought permission to leave her husband on the grounds that he played dice and was losing all their money; the husband was ordered to give up gambling and to treat his wife well or face a whipping.

It would be easy enough, from examples such as these, to make lists of victims and villains but there would be little point in the exercise unless it could be shown that judges consistently favoured one or the other sex. While it is possible that future work may indeed uncover evidence of gender bias, there is as yet no reason to suspect it. On the contrary, every effort seems to have been made to pay equal attention to both men's and women's stories. The woman threatened with a ducking in the pond fared neither better nor worse than one Robert Peper who sought an annulment of his marriage from Agnes Besete on the grounds that, caught in bed with her, the promise had been forced out of him. The logic applied in all cases was the same: objections to contracts had to be shown by men and women to be serious and sustained. For adultery, there was no double standard: in mid-fourteenth-century Rochester, for example, as punishment for adultery both man and woman

²⁰ R. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (1974), p. 102.

could expect a whipping three times round the churchyard, three times round the market.

The *Book of Rota* contained, it will be recalled, a test for infertility to be used by men and women; there was no hint of any suspicion that childlessness would be attributed, as a matter of course, to the barrenness of the woman. The same even-handedness appears in matrimonial cases. Here infertility as such was not grounds for the dissolution of a marriage. Impotence, on the other hand, was. Despite the ruling of Peter Lombard that sex was not necessary to create a union, none the less the inability to have sexual intercourse and therefore to render the marriage debt to one's partner was held to be an adequate reason to seek an annulment. Marriage, after all, had been instituted to provide both men and women with a legitimate sex-life, 'such that the infirmity that is prone to foul ruin might be rescued by the uprightness of marriage'. So said the eleventh-century decretalist Gratian who went on to explain that sex did not exist only for the purposes of procreation:

it is clear that [couples] are not commanded to join together solely for the procreation of children. Yet marriage is not to be judged evil on that account, for that which is done outside of the generation is not an evil of marriage, but is forgiveable on account of the good of marriage which is threefold: fidelity, offspring and sacrament.²¹

A couple could, of course, choose not to consummate their marriage or to end their sexual obligations to each other, but without mutual agreement the value of the marriage debt was such that it had always to be met; if it was not, or could not be, the complaints of the aggrieved partner were to be seriously investigated. According to canon law, a woman's virginity might be inspected by matrons of good repute (as was the Virgin's, after the birth of Christ, by her midwife Salome in the medieval drama scene of the nativity based on an apocryphal Gospel); and by a custom possibly of English origin, men too were liable to be inspected. The earliest reference to this practice occurs, according to Jacqueline Murray, in the manual of Peter the Chanter's pupil, Thomas of Chobham. Here Chobham advocates a physical examination of the man's genitals by 'wise matrons', followed by a kind of bedroom trial:

²¹ Gratian, trans. P. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire* (1993), pp. 185–6.

after food and drink the man and woman are to be placed together in one bed and wise women are to be summoned around the bed for many nights. And if the man's member is always found useless and as if dead, the couple are well able to be separated.²²

Cases in which this kind of procedure was followed are rare but they occurred in both York and Canterbury. In a case of 1292 at Canterbury twelve women 'worthy of faith of good reputation and honest life' testified that 'the virile member' of one Walter de Fonte was 'useless'. In a comparable case at York in 1433 every effort was made to arouse the husband but to no effect. According to the court's report:

The ... witness exposed her naked breasts and with her hands warmed at the said fire, she held and rubbed the penis and testicles of the said John. And she embraced and frequently kissed the said John, and stirred him up in so far as she could to show his virility and potency, admonishing him for shame that he should then and there prove and render himself a man. And she says, examined and diligently questioned, that the whole time aforesaid, the said penis was scarcely three inches long ... remaining without any increase or decrease.

Whereupon 'with one voice' the assembled women cursed John for not being 'better able to serve and please' his wife and left the court.²³

The court cases mentioned above are interesting not least for the light they throw on the uses made of church courts by couples from right across the social spectrum to solve their matrimonial problems. Those who appear in marriage disputes before the ecclesiastical courts come from varied backgrounds; peasants and artisans as well as the more nobly born could and did take advantage of the church's teaching on marriage. The message of the twelfth-century canonists that there could be no legal marriage without free consent was understood by all classes. The choice of spouse belonged to the individual whether commoner or royal (a daughter of Edward I, much to the king's fury, married without his permission). Words of consent could not be undone. In medieval England one of the best documented of cases is the love-match between Margery, daughter of that thrusting Norfolk

²² J. Murray, 'On the Origins and Role of "Wise Women" in Cases of Annulment on the Grounds of Male Impotence', *Journal of Medieval History* 16 (1990), p. 243.

²³ R. Helmholz, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

family, the Pastons, and their bailiff Richard Calle. Despite the outrage of Margery's brother John that his sister should marry so far beneath her station – 'to sell candle and mustard in Framlingham' – and despite the intensity of the pressure put upon Margery, the Bishop of Norwich had no choice but to uphold the marriage.

Margery won her case, even though her mother threw her out of the house, dismissing her as 'but a brethele'; but Richard kept his job as bailiff and the eldest son of the marriage received £20 from his grandmother in her will. In this story, as Colin Richmond has said, 'we cannot help ourselves cheering for Margery' even if we acknowledge, with the bishop, the loss caused by the match to her kin and to her friends. Margery remains, in our eyes, a heroine, a 'gritty individual'.²⁴ There are others: we might recall Agnes Nakerer and the travelling minstrel John Kent with whom she fell in love and whom she clandestinely married. Agnes's mortified parents found her another groom but she would have none of it. The York court upheld her alliance with Kent despite his being described as a 'public minstrel and juggler, frequently, dishonestly and shamefully engaged in sport displaying his body for the sake of profit'.²⁵

Agnes and Margery, Richard and John were, in the terminology of the courts, 'constant women' and 'constant men'; their rights were vindicated by their determination. Whether they lived happily ever after we do not know; it is perhaps not only as twentieth-century readers that we hope they did. However, we cannot assume that their stories are typical. What happened to couples of weaker mettle? How often were women of all classes forced into marriages against their will in contravention of the doctrine of the Church? What kind of pressures lay behind their unions? We will consider first the circumstances of the group particularly vulnerable to family bartering, the aristocracy.

If, in our eyes, the heroines are those women of resolve who chose their own partners, then the victims must be the heiresses abducted by land-hungry barons. John Giffard, in the reign of Henry III, was alleged to have forcibly removed

²⁴ C. Richmond, 'The Pastons Revisited: Marriage and Family in Fifteenth Century England', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 58 (1985), p. 34.

²⁵ Cited in R. Helmholz, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

the wealthy Maud de Clifford from her castle at Canford, Dorset, and married her. Maud's protest was overruled and she had to stay with John. Abductions could, of course, also be arranged by women themselves as a way of outwitting arranged alliances; but acquiescence with family arrangements was the more usual course. There is no need to interpret such compliance every time as mere spinelessness; we must allow for expectations, neither fruitless nor valueless, on the part of young girls that husbands would be found for them who would bring both them and their families income and honour. Getting married was like finding a job: the working conditions were important, advice from those with experience was welcome and the testimonials of elders essential.

None the less, children in particular were pawns in the marriage game; faced with betrothal ceremonies they did not fully understand they may, like Margaret Beaufort, have invented their own stories to try to make sense of subsequent events. Margaret, betrothed at the age of six to John de la Pole, was re-betrothed when she was nine to Edmund Tudor. Years later she had come to believe that, faced with two suitors, she had had a choice of husband and that in her indecision she had been advised to pray to St Nicholas, 'the patron and helper of all true maidens, and to beseech him to put into her mind what she were best to do'.²⁶ This trust in the 'rightness' of an arranged marriage goes far to explain how resolutely child-brides might insist on the consummation of matches which a modern reader might assume unpalatable. Agnes, daughter of Henry of Essex, fought long and hard for the recognition of her marriage to a man perhaps forty years older than herself, arranged when she was only three. Her battle lasted all her teenage years. What precisely fuelled her tenacity we do not know; but the pressures on her to deny her wedding contract were so considerable that we can be confident that the persistent decision to resist them was hers.

It has often been assumed that the marrying off of daughters was something of a nuisance; that it was the son and heir in any family who really counted; and that if there were no suitable husbands around for spare daughters it was easy enough to find convent space for them. For various reasons this is a

²⁶ M. Jones and M. Underwood, *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort* (1992), pp. 37-8.

seriously misleading picture. Even in families seemingly well-endowed with sons and heirs, there was always the strong possibility that these male children might not survive long enough to pass on the inheritance. Consider the case of William Marshal who died in 1219 leaving five sons and five daughters. By 1245 each of those sons had died, childless, and so the Marshal inheritance was shared among the five daughters.

From the late twelfth century, as we have seen, such daughters divided inheritances equally among themselves. And, even if they were not heiresses, daughters, like younger sons, could expect some form of endowment. Primogeniture, the right of the eldest son to the bulk of the estate, co-existed with what has been called 'diverging devolution' whereby provision of some kind was made for all family members. Such a system necessarily threatened to deplete the original estate and so made its replenishment a constant source of concern. Women contributed in equal measure to both processes. They thereby helped to create elaborate networks of kinship and affinity within which land circulated and social relationships were maintained. Scott Waugh's study of this system at work in the thirteenth century has shown its effectiveness and the care taken to maintain it.²⁷ One useful strategy was 'sister exchange'; thus, in 1237, Peter de Brus married his son and his eldest daughter to the daughter and son of Peter and Isabel de Mauley. A variation on the same theme was for sons to marry sisters: two of William Marshal's granddaughters married sons of Ralph de Mortimer. In the next generation, the two sons of one of these marriages each married a woman who could trace her ancestry, albeit circuitously, back to the Marshals. This system of 'social endogamy' set up, according to Waugh, a 'consanguineous group' which helped to take the sting out of the problems which demography and inheritance customs could cause.

Throughout our period, peace-weaving, too, remained an important and explicit motive for arranging marriages. William de Bohun in the fourteenth century married Elizabeth de Badlesmere, widow of the Earl of March despite, or rather because of, the part he had played in the death of March's father. The marriage had been arranged 'in order to put an end

²⁷ S. L. Waugh, *The Lordship of England: Royal Wardships and Marriages in English Society, 1217-1327* (1988).

to the enmities between the two families'. After the Barons' Wars of the mid-thirteenth century, the peace terms agreed between the former rebel, Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford, and Roger Mortimer of Wigmore (the recipient of Robert's confiscated lands) included a marriage between Mortimer's daughter, Margaret, and Robert's son. Should the son in question die before the marriage could be celebrated then Margaret was to marry his brother. If it goes without saying that there is no evidence that Margaret was consulted, it must equally be remembered that neither were Robert's sons.

Marriage strategies were an important part of family politics for all sections of society, from the richest to the poorest. If we move now to the other end of the social scale, to peasants or villeins, we will find that peasant women had extra problems with which to contend. Before marriage, a peasant wife might have had to pay *merchet*, *legerwite* or even *chidewite*. Already we are in a thicket of terminology which must be explained even if it cannot be satisfactorily defined. These fines are a mark of villein status, seemingly an indication of the right of the lord of the manor to exercise control over female peasant sexuality. *Legerwite*, literally 'lying down', is a fine of Anglo-Saxon origin; in post-Conquest England it was the penalty for illicit sex, usually but not always premarital, and usually but not always levied only on the woman. *Chidewite* was the fine for having an illegitimate child. *Merchet* was the sum to be paid for a licence to marry.

On examination, however, it transpires that these fines were a kind of sporadic taxation only erratically imposed. When, for example, in 1316, the lord of the manor in Wakefield, Yorkshire, badly needed extra cash, an unprecedented collecting of fines – for both *legerwite* or for failure to pay *merchet* – followed. The reasons behind the imposition of such fines are not always so clear. In some instances, the manorial court's demand for payments of *legerwite* may have been an attempt to ensure that couples accused of adultery before an ecclesiastical court did not try to commute a sentence of flogging into a payment of cash which would then leave the manor. It has also been suggested that a tax on brothels can sometimes be detected behind *legerwite*. As for *merchet*, is this a tax on people or property? In some manors it seems to have been levied only on the richer peasants; but this was not the case at Spalding in Lincolnshire, where *merchet* was regularly levied and where,

in one instance, all that was asked for was a few herrings.

The herrings are exceptional; what recent research has shown to be surprisingly usual was for women to pay their own fines, sometimes paying *legerwite* and *merchet* as a combined fine. Fathers and husbands are found paying fines too but the records from the courts of Wakefield, Spalding, and, in Huntingdonshire, Ramsey Abbey and Houghton-cum-Wyton all show years when the majority of *merchets* (the commoner of the two fines) were paid by the women themselves. This financial independence is significant not only because it confirms the notion that women had some say in whom they married, but because it indicates that women had savings. None the less, it is clear that peasant women could also be put under pressure to marry, in their case by manorial lords anxious to maintain the man and women power needed for the successful running of their estates.

In 1308, for example, the prior of Norwich granted 24 acres of customary land to a man and his wife on condition that within eighteen months they married one of their daughters to a bondsman of the prior, by whom it was then to be held. If the marriage failed to take place then the land was to revert to the prior and the parents would have to pay a fine of 40 shillings. At Horsham St Faith, also in Norfolk, where the lord of the manor was the prior of St Faith, some time between 1284 and 1290, nineteen men and twenty-nine women were summoned by the prior and told whom they were to marry; the spouses had been chosen by a jury of local men. If the marriages did not take place heavy fines – the equivalent of a labourer's wage for twelve days – might be exacted. The peasants, even after paying the fines, still had to marry, only now they could choose other partners. According to Elaine Clark, while there are no signs of protest against such a system there is plentiful evidence that the peasants preferred to pay and choose rather than to submit to a prearranged match.²⁸ In 1291, for example, also in Horsham St Faith, a mother was fined 6d for impeding the marriage of her daughter to the man chosen by the jurors; the girl herself was fined a further 3d, and the intended groom (who had already refused two other brides) had to pay the same amount.

The right to choose a husband was, then, as jealously

²⁸ E. Clark, *op. cit.*

guarded as it could be flagrantly ignored. It would therefore seem appropriate to end this section by looking at one of the twelfth century's most famous test cases, that of Christina of Markyate. Christina was the eldest daughter of Anglo-Saxon burghers of Huntingdon, an ambitious couple who hoped to better themselves in the new world of Anglo-Norman England. A good marriage for Christina would advance their social standing. Christina, determined to remain a virgin, thought otherwise. According to her *Life*, written by someone who knew her well, Christina was mercilessly treated by her parents in the attempt to force her into marriage with Burthred, the man of their choice. They tried to bewitch her; they tried to get her drunk; they pulled her hair, beat and stripped her, and encouraged Burthred in his attempts to rape her. At last, in a decision that was a triumph for the Church's new views on marriage, Christina was released from her betrothal to Burthred and allowed to fulfil her own vow to become a nun. Her experiences have suggested to Jocelyn Wogan-Browne that the model of tortured virgins presented by hagiography, and usually dismissed as distasteful and gratuitously violent, may not, after all, have been unsuitable reading for those young women of the twelfth century whose chosen groom was Christ.²⁹ These are women we will meet again in Chapters Nine and Ten; meanwhile we must return to those women who had chosen to marry and to fulfil the command to 'increase and multiply'.

Motherhood

A fifteenth-century tenant of the Haberdon meadow in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, might be expected to keep a white bull on his or her land for use in the town's conception ritual. Such a bull, suitably festooned with garlands, would be regularly led by the monks of Bury St Edmunds in procession from the meadow. Women who wanted to conceive would accompany the bull, stroking its sides, until the gates of the abbey were reached. At this point they would enter the church to make their prayers and offerings at the shrine of the Anglo-Saxon martyr St Edmund. This is a ceremony which offers a very

²⁹ J. Wogan-Browne, 'Saints' Lives and the Female Reader', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 27 (1991), pp. 314-29.

different perspective on the woes of pregnancy and childbirth from the lurid account given by the author of the renowned treatise on virginity, *Holy Maidenhood*:

Your rosy face will grow thin, and turn green as grass; your eyes will grow dull, and shadowed underneath, and because of your dizziness your head will ache cruelly. Inside, in your belly, a swelling in your womb which bulges you out like a water-skin, discomfort in your bowels and stitches in your side, and often painful backache; heaviness in every limb; the dragging weight of your two breasts, and the streams of milk that run from them. Your beauty is all destroyed by pallor; there is a bitter taste in your mouth, and everything that you eat makes you feel sick; and whatever food your stomach disdainfully receives – that is, with distaste – it throws up again ... Worry about your labour pains keeps you awake at night. Then when it comes to it, that cruel distressing anguish, that fierce and stabbing pain, that incessant misery, that torment upon torment, that wailing outcry; while you are suffering from this, and from your fear of death, shame added to that suffering with the shameful craft of old wives who know about that painful ordeal, whose help is necessary to you, however indecent it may be; and there you must put up with whatever happens to you.³⁰

Such a text, though sometimes seem as representative of medieval misogyny, stands in sharp contrast both to the processing women and their bull and to the idealised vision of the birth of Christ. Here Mary, as mother, not only retains perpetual virginity; she is also spared the pains of childbirth. It has frequently been suggested that this rosy picture of Mary presented medieval women with an unrealistic and confusing role model. It is far from clear that medieval women themselves were troubled by the chasm between their experience and Mary's; nor that they were unduly worried by the message of tracts such as *Holy Maidenhood* – tracts which, in any case, may have been written with only a select audience in mind. (see p. 214-5). Motherhood and not virginity was what most women expected. Mary, it was reckoned, had had her own share of suffering at the foot of the Cross; if their own was to be in childbirth, Mary and the saints would help them through it. A charm from an English manuscript of the mid-eleventh century – Junius 85 – bears witness to this:

Mary, a virgin, bare Christ; the barren Elisabeth bare John the Baptist. I

³⁰ B. Millet and J. Wogan-Browne (eds and trans.), *Medieval English Prose for Women* (1990), pp. 31-2.

charge thee, infant, if thou be male or female, by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that thou come forth ... The Lord, seeing the sisters of Lazarus weeping at his tomb, wept in the presence of the Jews and exclaimed, 'Lazarus come forth' ... Write this on wax which has not been used for any work, and bind it under the right foot.

Such Anglo-Saxon lore was not forgotten after the Conquest. Annotations in manuscripts are an indication that traditional remedies were still in use at least until the thirteenth century. Familiar prognostications are likely to have been handed down: the mother who walks slowly, for example, and has hollow eyes, will bear a son; if she walks quickly and has swollen eyes, the baby will be a girl, if she walks with her weight on her heels – a boy, on her toes – a girl. Bald's *Leechbook*, our prime source for Anglo-Saxon medicine, strikes us as a strange amalgam of superstition, both native and classical, and sound advice. In Chapter 37 of *Leechbook III*, 'a pregnant woman is to be earnestly warned that she should eat nothing salty or sweet, or drink beer, or eat swine's flesh or anything fat, or drink to intoxication, or travel by road, or ride too much on horseback, lest the child be born before the proper time.' Nor is she to eat 'bull's flesh or ram's or buck's or boar's or gander's or that of any animal that can beget' or the child may be hump-backed.

Alongside Bald, new manuals appeared in post-Conquest England bearing the imprint of the latest developments in medical science. We have already considered some of the 'Trotula' texts and *The Sickness of Women*. A work that was likewise very popular was the *Encyclopaedia of Bartholomew the Englishman*, probably so titled because England was Bartholomew's birthplace, though as a teacher and scholar his homes were France and Germany.

In his section on childbirth Bartholomew draws heavily on the newly available works of Aristotle and Galen, on translations recently made from the Arabic of classical medical texts by Constantine the African. Here too are recommendations that by modern canons seem eminently reasonable: the newly born child is to be kept from extremes of temperature or of light; limbs should be gently massaged; honey and salt, still recognised today as possessing antiseptic properties, are to be used, though in this case to 'reduce the humours'; the infant may be soothed by songs and by rocking. But behind all this lies an alien philosophy:

The mother is so called because she nourishes the newborn with her breasts. She takes care of the infant; while it is in the womb, it is fed with blood, but at birth, nature drives this blood into the breast, so that it is transformed into milk in order to feed the child. Although the mother conceives in passion, she gives birth in suffering and grief. She very much loves her infant, embraces, kisses and lovingly nurses and feeds it. After she has been impregnated, the mother no longer emits menstrual blood because, as Aristotle says, this blood is now used to nourish the creature. A mother suffers less from the conception of a boy-child and her colouring is therefore more beautiful and cleaner, and her movements lighter than during the conception of a girl as Aristotle and Constantine say. The closer the birth comes, the more the mother suffers and is fatigued by the motion of the foetus. It is a sign of impregnation, according to Aristotle and Galen, that mothers desire different things, the colouring changes, the area under the eyes turns black, the breasts are enlarged, and the uterus grows slowly in size. Because of the size of the growing foetus, she suffers nausea and vomiting, feels heavy and unable to work. During the birth, she is forced to cry out in pain, and is easily endangered, especially young women, whose limbs are stiff and inflexible. The more the mother suffers during the birth of the child, the more she enjoys it and loves to teach it more.³¹

This is a passage heavy with Aristotelian learning – and misogyny; the conception of a boy-child is clearly the preferred option. A gulf separates its world from that of Bald's *Leechbook* or the forbidding rhetoric of *Holy Maidenhood*, and even more so from the Anglo-Saxon charm to be written on wax. Here there is neither magic nor repulsion. An attempt to understand and explain the physiology of pregnancy lies at the centre of the work. This attitude also permeates the extensive treatment of pregnancy that we find in at least one version of *The Sickness of Women*.³²

Childbirth in *The Sickness of Women* is not necessarily seen as traumatic; if all goes well and there is a 'natural' birth, then 'twenty pangs' or so will do. We have no way of telling how often the twenty pangs sufficed; necessarily we are far better informed about possible complications, though we do not know the extent of their seriousness. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England it has been estimated that one in every forty women died in childbirth and that as many as two

³¹ M. Goodich (trans.), 'Bartholomaeus Anglicus on Child-Rearing', *History of Childhood Quarterly* 3 (1975), p. 80.

³² This is the version translated by B. Rowland in *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health* and referred to hereafter.

hundred out of a thousand children died before the age of five. Improvements in maternal mortality rates around the millennium have been suggested – the introduction of iron cooking pots is said to have helped to counteract anaemia – but in the absence of parish records no satisfactory statistics can be compiled for preceding centuries. Mothers were advised to make their confessions before the onset of labour lest they die giving birth. Complications envisaged in *The Sickness of Women* begin with sixteen ‘unnatural’ presentations. In such cases, it is the responsibility of the midwife, with her hands anointed with wild thyme oil, lily oil or oil of musk, to attempt to turn or rearrange the baby or to enlarge the cervix as appropriate. The second form of complication relates to stillbirths. There is, as we have seen, no question in early medical texts but that it is the life of the mother and not the baby which is to be saved, should a choice have to be made.

On what may be called the theology of childbirth *The Sickness of Women* is silent. We must turn to other texts to understand the full extent here of the midwife’s responsibilities. The unbaptised child who dies has no destiny other than limbo. The baptised child, on the other hand, is assured of heaven. Baptism was a sacrament which, in an emergency, could be bestowed by a lay man or woman; it was a duty therefore incumbent on all midwives in cases where the child seemed unlikely to survive. There was no need to wait until the baby was fully delivered; if there seemed the slightest likelihood of a stillbirth, then any protruding limb could be baptised. Priests were to ensure that midwives understood this; that clean water was available in case the ceremony became necessary and that they knew the correct form of words. The midwife in Robert Manning’s *Handling Synne* loses the life and soul of the child she has delivered (and thereafter her job) through her ignorance of the proper procedure.

The unbaptised child, shut out from heaven, was in theory – and this is confirmed in *Handling Synne* – excluded from burial in consecrated ground; this might even be the case if mother and child had died together before the actual birth. In some instances the child was removed (by hooks and perforators) before the mother went to her grave. Yet more traumatic was the problem of deciding at what point a mother was indeed dead; from the early thirteenth century it became the practice to perform post-mortem Caesareans, even if there was only

time to baptise the dying child. Claims about Caesareans in which both mother and child survived were first made in the sixteenth century; even then they were greeted with scepticism and dismissed as ‘absurd, incredible and worthless’. In the thirteenth century the development of guilds of barber surgeons, who were officially licensed to use surgical instruments, meant that in theory Caesareans fell within their province. In practice, however, they remained, throughout the Middle Ages, more usually a midwife’s task. In the fifteenth-century manual, *Instructions for Parish Priests* by John Mirk, the priest is told:

And if the woman then should die
Teach the midwife that she hurry
For to undo her with a knife
In order to save the child’s life
And hurry that it christened be
For that is a deed of charity.

The awesomeness of the Church’s teaching on neonatal baptism, coupled with the limitations of medical skill, underlines both the responsibilities of the midwife and the anxieties roused by her calling. She seldom acted on her own. She might be accompanied by a fellow midwife but in any case births were sociable occasions likely to be witnessed by friends and neighbours, though not, with rare exceptions, by men. The company provided a ready-made band of witnesses in the event of any criticism of the midwife’s judgement, competence or conduct. Had she performed a Caesarean too soon – or too late? Had she baptised a child already dead in order to secure him or her burial in consecrated ground? Had she been an accomplice to fraud, accessory to a ‘pretence’ birth to a barren woman? (A woman in the *Life of Hugh of Lincoln*, desperate for an heir, feigns a pregnancy using a pillow and the birth by subsequently adopting a peasant woman’s child.) The temptations and pitfalls for any midwife were such that the interest of priests in their training and instruction becomes easy to understand. At times we glimpse priests at the bedside during childbirth. Peter Biller has drawn attention to the report of one such priest, for whom the outcome was quite literally a miracle:

One of my parishioners was in labour in a difficult childbirth. One arm

would not come out, and when it would not follow the hands of the midwives who were struggling to bring it out it swelled to equal the thickness of a man's leg ... the [mother] shrank at every touch, and whenever they [the midwives] applied their hands she cried out in dread. She went through almost a night and a day ... I profess I noticed there was no help for her unless the arm was cut off. Fortunately the hand was withdrawn and the foetus turned and presented normally: all through the intervention of St Thomas [of Canterbury] ...³³

Mothers themselves in the course of difficult labours would, as we have seen, have offered prayers to the Virgin and to saints. The patron saint of childbirth was St Margaret. No matter that she was martyred rather than married, her experience during torture of being swallowed and spat out by a dragon gave her unrivalled powers of empathy with the processes of birth and women in labour listened to readings from her *Life*. A similar process of association must account for the prayer in the Sarum liturgy to be said for a pregnant woman, addressed as it is to God 'who delivered Jonah from the whale's belly'. Up and down the country saints, both male and female, could be expected to help women in labour: at Burton-on-Trent in Staffordshire, pregnant women 'were very desirous' to have the staff of St Modwena 'to lean on'; at Rievaulx Abbey in Yorkshire, monks guarded the girdle of St Ailred, known as it was to be 'helpful to lying-in-women'. In 1538, the Bishop of Salisbury gave instructions that midwives in his diocese were not to use 'girdles, purses, measures of our Lady or such other superstitious things'³⁴.

There are earlier references to superstitious practices which, from the early Reformation, ecclesiastics were trying to eradicate: in *The Sickness of Women* mention is made of 'a girdle of hart's skin' and of the beneficial powers of the 'precious stone called jasper', though this text is on the whole marked by an absence of such prophylactics. However, this should not be understood as evidence of learned as opposed to popular – or rustic – medicine. The use of birth girdles cut across both time and class. Such a girdle already appears in Bald's *Leechbook*: in the case of a difficult labour the woman is to 'put on her girdle these prayers as it is said in these *Leechbooks*'. The survival of a prayer roll, 180 centimetres long – the length corresponded

³³ P. Biller, 'Childbirth in the Middle Ages', *History Today* (August 1986), pp. 42–3.

³⁴ See E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992), p. 384.

to the supposed height of Christ – used as a birth girdle, is a telling example of their popularity; over-handling has made the roll' (Wellcome MS 632) barely legible. At Westminster Abbey, the monks guarded the Virgin's own girdle, this had been given to them by Edward the Confessor and it was available on loan for aristocratic and royal births.

Royal births necessarily were surrounded with particular pomp and circumstance. None the less, the rituals and rites they followed were common property. Thus St Thomas of Canterbury, invoked by Peter Biller's parishioner, was also called upon by Henry III when his queen, Eleanor (a borrower of the Virgin's girdle), was expecting her fourth child: a thousand candles were lit around his tomb. Eleanor safely gave birth to a boy who was christened Edmund because the antiphon of St Edmund was being chanted on her behalf at the time when he was born. In most cases, the name chosen would be expected to be that of one of the godparents – every boy had to have at least two men and a woman as godparents, every girl two women and a man – but a favoured saint or a particular association might override this convention. At a Yorkshire christening, for example, 'there was a question among those in the church how [the baby] could be called Katherine as neither of her godmothers was called so and to this it was replied that for the love of St Katherine she was so named.' Queen Eleanor herself as a godmother had lifted her godchild from the font and 'named her Mary because she was born on the eve of the Conception of the Blessed Mary'.³⁵

Baptisms (other than bedside ceremonies) were meant to take place within eight days of the delivery, but given the rate of infant mortality it seemed risky to wait even as long as a week. Baptism on the day of the birth was not unusual. The ceremony was more elaborate than a baby can expect today, entailing as it did three immersions in the font – one on each side and one face downwards. Mothers, for whom a 'lying-in time' was the norm, were not expected to be present. Newly delivered mothers were considered to be 'weak and sick and lacking in bodily strength' and, in reasonably affluent homes, an extra servant might be hired as a nurse to help out during this period. To the visionary St Bridget, in a work translated

³⁵ L. Haas, 'Social Connections between Parents and Godparents in Late Medieval Yorkshire', *Medieval Prosopography* 10 (1989), p. 17.

into Middle English, it was a sign of the miraculous nature of Christ's birth that the Virgin was none of these things, and indeed was even strong enough to go to the Temple on the eighth day for Christ's circumcision.

'Ordinary' mothers re-emerged, publicly, only at the time of their purification, or churching. The origins of this ceremony are to be found in the Old Testament (Leviticus 12: 1-5) but the distinction that is made there between the birth of a boy and a girl does not seem to have been observed in medieval England where purification took place approximately a month after the birth, irrespective of gender. Associated as this ceremony is with Old Testament taboos concerning menstruation, the purification of women has often been seen as part and parcel of clerical misogyny; it may therefore be worth pointing out that the related injunction not to resume sexual intercourse until then closely tallies with modern medical advice which likewise recommends this for at least a month after a birth. It also seems as if the service, marked by the mothers with gifts of candles before whichever altar in the church was dedicated to Our Lady, was seen by women themselves not as a reminder of their fallen nature but rather as a thanksgiving in imitation of Candlemas, the Virgin's own Feast of the Purification, and as a way of sharing in her maternity. The iconography of the Altar of Our Lady at Ranworth in Norfolk, where new mothers of the parish presented themselves, recalled not only Christ's birth but that of the Virgin herself and of her sisters and cousins. Churching was thus a joyous occasion, providing an opportunity for dressing up and for a party. Records for several of Queen Eleanor's purifications suggest that fine music, plenty of candles, a splendid feast and lavish almsgiving were the order of the day. By contrast, it was considered to be a mark of the exceptional humility of St Elizabeth of Hungary (in a Middle English *Life*) that at her purifications she wore neither jewellery nor expensive clothes.

For the poor, on the other hand, the experience of child-bearing and childbirth might bring hardship. A frequently asked question is how far in these circumstances either contraception or infanticide was practised. Penitential manuals make it clear that by the early fourteenth century, possibly as a result of demographic pressures, the practice of *coitus interruptus* was considered sufficiently widespread to be troubling to confessors; recent research suggests that effective herbal

abortifacients were also both known about and used. Individual cases of infanticide certainly occurred but there is no evidence to show that these were other than extraordinary. Examination of church court records by Richard Helmholz and of coroners and gaol delivery rolls by Barbara Hanawalt have brought to light only a very small number of examples.³⁶ The cases cited by Hanawalt include the finding in the River Thames near Oxford of a baby of unknown parentage who, it was assumed, had not been baptised since the umbilical cord had not been tied.³⁷ To judge from the more abundant continental evidence the motive behind such acts of infanticide was more often shame than poverty; it is possible that in England, where the stigma attached to illegitimacy seems slight, the social pressures that led women to kill their children were significantly reduced.

Charitable provision for unwanted children did exist, albeit on a small scale. Foundling hospitals took in abandoned children, or offered unmarried women beds where they could give birth and, in the event of their deaths, undertook to care for their children until the age of seven. But there was no monastic order in England (as there was in France) dedicated solely to the care of foundlings and orphans. The question must be asked, how are we to explain this difference, a difference which the work of Peter Biller on the penitentials of England and Europe has recently accentuated?³⁸ It is the English penitentials that Biller has found to be particularly concerned with abortion, infanticide, and with preventive measures to reduce infant mortality. Again and again both ecclesiastical and secular legislation drummed home the responsibilities of caring for children and the wickedness of in any way causing their death. Whether these measures were particularly needed or heeded can only be a matter for conjecture. In the light of current concerns about global population, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the notion that children are a liability rather than an asset depends upon

³⁶ R. Helmholz, 'Infanticide in the Province of Canterbury during the Fifteenth Century', *History of Childhood Quarterly* 2 (1974-5); B. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound* (1986), p. 102.

³⁷ B. Hanawalt, 'Childrearing among the Lower Classes of Late Medieval England', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (1977), p. 9.

³⁸ P. Biller, 'Marriage Patterns and Women's Lives', in J. P. J. Goldberg (ed.), *Woman is a Worthy Wight* (1992), pp. 60-107.

their being viewed as consumers rather than producers; for agriculturally based societies, it is sometimes the producers who are in short supply.

This must be the place to mention briefly a debate of some relevance to our topic, albeit one that has perhaps already run its course: conducted under the heading 'Did medieval mothers love their children?' it is something of a cuckoo-child hatched in a nest built originally by Philippe Ariès.³⁹ Ariès's primary concern was with the concept of childhood. 'The idea of childhood,' he wrote, 'is not to be confused with affection for children'; but in much subsequent writing this is precisely what has happened. This is not to deny that there is much to be learned from questioning notions of maternal love; but it is an exercise peculiarly full of pitfalls. We cannot hope to fathom the emotions of 'bad mothers' and 'good mothers', whether we think we know them well, like the mother of Margery Paston (cf. p. 117), or whether they are strangers, like the mother of the unbaptised baby found in the River Thames. What we can do is to note how contemporaries expected mothers to behave and attempt to identify the feelings they recognised as 'maternal'. There are many examples, ranging from homely depictions of mothers playing hide-and-seek with their children (in the *Ancrene Riwe* of the early thirteenth century) or of Sarah, anxious mother of Isaac, in the biblical plays 'Let Isaac abide at home here / For I kept not he went in the wynde', to the grandiloquent words attributed by Ordericus Vitalis in Book III of his *Historia Ecclesiastica* to Matilda, wife of William the Conqueror, in justification of her support for the rebellion of her son:

O, my lord, do not wonder that I love my first-born with tender affection. By the power of the most High, if my son Robert were dead and buried seven feet in the earth ... and I could bring him back to life with my own blood, I would shed my life-blood for him.

'Unnatural' mothers, on the other hand, that is to say those who killed their children, rather than offering to die for them, were generally regarded by the courts who heard their cases as insane. Pleas of insanity were sufficiently unusual for this to be a striking form of defence. In a rather different category are the attempts by mothers to pass on the responsibilities of

³⁹ P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), p. 128.

child-care to putative fathers or share this with them. A case heard in the ecclesiastical court at Rochester in Kent provides us with an illustration of such a case, though we do not know the outcome:

And the woman placed the child on the ground in front of the judge, saying that she no longer wished to care for it, but that it should be taken by the father, who she asserted was the said Rowland. To which the man replied, denying it, and offered to undergo compurgation as to any carnal relations with her. Then the judge warned the woman to receive the child at her breast to nourish it with due sustenance under pain of major excommunication until the question of paternity was discussed.

It would be otiose to underline the topicality of such a case.

The Upbringing of Children

According to medieval theories based on *The Etymologies of Words*, the highly influential work of the seventh-century scholar Isidore of Seville, an individual was an infant until the age of seven, a child until fourteen, and an adolescent – or, more accurately, youth – until twenty-eight. Isidore's scheme suffered several adaptations, but his definition of infancy was seldom challenged. Until they were seven years old, children were considered both to lack moral reasoning and to be in need of particularly close attention; it was part of the duties of the godparents, as promised at baptism, to keep their godchildren safe from fire and water during this time, and it was considered both usual and reasonable for children, both boys and girls, to stay for their first seven years in the care of their mothers, though thereafter boys of noble birth could be expected to be handed over for their education to a male tutor (and girls, sometimes, to a 'mistress'). Practice, however, might be very different from theory, depending on a wide variety of circumstances. An heir or heiress who became a ward of court might have to leave his or her mother, even if still a baby, to join the household of a guardian until the age of majority was reached. The mother herself could bid for this guardianship; there are even cases of mothers kidnapping such children, though whether from sentiment or for gain, given the value of an heir or heiress on the marriage market is questionable.

In general, noble women would not have expected close

involvement with the upbringing of their children; it was not unusual to entrust them either to nuns or to a foster home at an early age as part of their education. None the less, a writ of Henry III to Mabel, widow of Roger Torpell, makes poignant reading. Her son had died; now she must surrender her daughter:

To Mabel, late the wife of Roger Torpell. She must well remember that the king gave the custody of the land and heirs of the said Roger de Torpell, with the marriage of the heirs, to R. bishop of Chichester, the chancellor during the minority of the heirs, whereof because William the eldest son and heir has died, the king commands her, as she loves herself and her goods, not to eloin Acelota, sister and next heir of the said William . . . but to deliver her to the messenger of the said bishop bearing these letters of the bishop testifying that he is the messenger.⁴⁰

Among the peasantry, unburdened by such inheritance problems, the mother was likely to be appointed guardian by the lord of the manor if the father died but, particularly during the Black Death when a high proportion of children lost both their parents, children might be brought up by more distant kin and often by parish priests.

Returning to the theorists and the ideal world, we find that the mother should feed her children herself though in 'Trotula A', colostrum is not recommended; 'some men say it is good for [the baby] to drink the milk of nine women before he drinks his mother's milk' but thereafter 'his mother's milk is best for him'.⁴¹ Bartholomew the Englishman, as we have seen, went so far as to define a mother in relation to her function as breast-feeder: 'the mother [mater] is so called because she nourishes the newborn with her breast [mamma]'. None the less, among the aristocracy few women seem to have fed their own babies. They regularly employed wet nurses, usually bringing them into the household rather than sending the babies out to their homes (although, strangely, no evidence exists of wet-nursing in London, in contrast with medieval Florence where plentiful records of the practice have survived). The 'mother' in the *Life* of Hugh of Lincoln, in a nicely ironic ploy, was able to hand over her supposed infant to the actual mother to feed. In his

⁴⁰ S. Sheridan Walker, 'Widow and Ward: the Feudal Law of Child Custody in Medieval England', *Women in Medieval Society* (1976), p. 160.

⁴¹ London, British Library, MS Additional 12195, ff. 157r-185r, at ff. 169v-170r. I owe this reference to Monica Green.

treatise Bartholomew moves quickly on from the mother to discuss the feeding role of a second person, the nurse, and to describe her related duties:

The nurse (nutrix) is so named because of her nourishing (nutriendo) power, since she is suitable for feeding the newborn child. A nurse, says Isidore [of Seville], feeds the child in place of the mother. Like a mother, the nurse is happy when the child is happy, and suffers when the child suffers. She lifts him up if he falls, gives him suck when he cries, kisses him if he is sick, binds and ties him if he flails about, cleans him if he has soiled himself, and feeds him although he struggles with his fingers. She instructs the child who cannot speak, babbling, practically breaking her tongue, in order to teach him speech more readily. She uses medicines in order to cure the sick child. She lifts him up on her hands, shoulders and knees, and relieves the crying child. She first chews the food, preparing it for the toothless child so he can swallow it more easily, and thus feeds the hungry child. Whistling and singing she strokes him as he sleeps and ties the childish limbs with bandages and linens, lest he suffer some curvature.⁴²

The practice of swaddling, as described here by Bartholomew, seems to have been common to all classes. Thus Gerald of Wales (1147-1223) in his *Topography of Ireland* considers it a sign of the barbarity of the Irish that they 'do not put their babies in cradles or swathe them'; nor, he continues, 'do midwives . . . use hot water to raise the nose or press down the face or lengthen the legs'.⁴³ Wet-nursing, as we have seen, was likely to have been confined to the middle or upper classes, except necessarily if the mother died or was unable to feed her child. An Anglo-Saxon charm to induce lactation in a woman who cannot nourish her child occurs in the treatise *Lacnunga*:

Take then in her hand milk of a cow of a single colour and then sip it with her mouth and then go to running water and spit the milk into it and take up in the same hand a mouthful of the water and swallow it. Then say these words: 'Everywhere have I carried for me the splendid strong kinsman; with this splendid well nourished one. I will have him for me and go home.' When she goes to the brook then let her not look around, nor again when she goes away; and then let her go into another house than that she started from and there let her taste food.⁴⁴

References to peasants employing rather than acting as wet

⁴² M. Goodich (trans.), *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁴³ Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland*, trans. J. O'Meara (1982), p. 100.

⁴⁴ M. L. Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine* (1993), p. 181.

nurses are rare; one such was the cause of marital tragedy; Isabel, wife of Nicholas le Swon, as reported in the Bedford court rolls of 1300, was spending so much time away from home feeding a neighbour's baby that the enraged Nicholas drew his sword and killed her. Perhaps more typical of wet-nursing arrangements is the case taken from the rural aristocracy of Yorkshire and recently brought to light by Jeremy Goldberg. In 1366 a certain Elena refused to act as wet nurse for her former mistress since she did not want to jeopardise the health of her own baby. Eighteen months later Elena, who was still feeding her child, was again approached by her former mistress who by now had a new baby in need of a wet nurse; this time, Elena agreed.⁴⁵ Most alien for the modern reader must be the Lateran decree of 1179, reinforced in England by a proclamation of Henry III, forbidding Christian wet nurses from nursing Jewish babies because, it was alleged, Jewish parents forced the wet nurses to 'express' their milk after Easter lest their babies should ingest the Eucharist.

According to one of the Latin 'Trotula' texts circulating in England, the wet nurse should be young, with a pink and white complexion. She must keep away from spicy food, especially from garlic, take plenty of exercise and drink vinegar syrup and light wine. Apart from the difficulty of finding any one to fit the bill, there could be dangers to the mother who employed a wet nurse in the drying-up of her milk: William of Malmesbury attributes the death of William the Conqueror's eldest daughter-in-law to an infection brought on by the binding of her breasts. None the less, wet-nursing remained a favoured custom throughout our period. Reluctance to breast-feed may have stemmed in part from the belief that the lactating mother should not make love. Arguably, given that breast-feeding has a contraceptive effect as we now know, a system which enabled the better-off to have more babies than poor wet-nurses had something to commend it. Priests, however, saw nothing in its favour. Thomas of Chobham (and the writers of later English penitentials would follow him) considered a mother's refusal to feed her own baby tantamount to murder; no other milk could be as suitable; to reject God's gift of milk-filled breasts was a

⁴⁵ P. J. J. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy* (1992), pp. 148-9.

kind of blasphemy that deserved a severe penance. The mother who claims that she is too delicate to feed her baby is to be greeted with scorn: 'was she not [already] so delicate when she underwent intercourse and the labour of giving birth?' But even Thomas is prepared to make concessions: if the mother 'truly cannot bear the labour, she should at least feed and wash the baby when she can, so that she does not seem . . . to overturn nature through never deigning to go near her own offspring'.⁴⁶

Though it may sound as if Thomas was fighting a losing battle, the indications are that the advice of priests did not always fall on deaf ears. Thirteenth-century mothers and nurses would have heard, week in week out, sermons on the need to feed babies 'with care'. They were regularly told that they must not take babies into bed with them until they were about three years old because of the danger of 'over-laying' them. Paediatricians today deny that this can happen, but to medieval preachers it was a cause of considerable anxiety. Deaths in such circumstances aroused suspicion. A fourteenth-century penitential asks:

whether the child was stifled thus in bed by the sides of its parents . . . If, however, it was found dead in its cot, a lesser penance should be imposed, because it is presumed that this did not happen through sure knowledge but rather through some lack of care. For it is not to be assumed that a mother is forgetful of her child⁴⁷

Preachers were insistent, too, on the need to ensure that cots were secure, that they could not be easily overturned, that babies were not left unattended, or near boiling water, or close to fire. That these were precisely the circumstances in which many babies did die should not necessarily be attributed either to their mothers' inattentiveness in church or to undue negligence on their part in the home. Coroners' rolls emphasise the precariousness of many children's lives whether or not they are at the mercy of a careless mother. Even the most securely tucked up baby might still fall victim to marauding sows.

Once weaned and out of swaddling clothes, what kind of education could children expect from their mothers? Here class is the all-important factor. As a general rule we must assume that children learned to imitate their parents' skills,

⁴⁶ Cited in P. Biller, 'Marriage Patterns and Women's Lives', *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁴⁷ Cited in P. Biller, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

whatever these might be; for girls, whether noble or peasant, spinning was the most common accomplishment. We should not, however, be too quick to assume that daughters necessarily followed in their mothers' footsteps. We find in London, c.1286, Katherine 'la surgienne' working alongside her surgeon father and brother. Education for girls as well as boys might take place outside the home, whether in a local school, monastery or convent. Opportunities for girls were more limited than for boys, despite the lack of discrimination in the Statute of Artificers of 1406: 'every man or woman, of what estate or condition that he be, shall be free to set their son and daughter to take learning at any manner of school that pleaseth them within the realm.' Both boys and girls might also be sent to other households as foster children or as servants to learn either good manners or a trade. We will return to such girls in their capacity as wage-earners; these are the young women who are the supposed audience of the late medieval poem *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, where a mother purports to pass on the lessons her own mother's views on decorous behaviour:

And when thou goest on thy way, go thou not too fast,
Brandish not with thy head, nor with thy shoulders cast,
Have not too many words, from swearing keep aloof,
For all such manners come to an evil proof.

A striking example of a mother's concern for the education of her children (possibly including a daughter) may be found in the will of Katherine Hawte (1493), recently cited by Carol Meale. Katherine leaves lands and property to be sold; the money raised is to be used so that her children can be 'kepte to scole'.⁴⁸

Tantalisingly, we can only guess at the extent to which women taught their children to read. The evidence points in this direction but it is episodic, starting with the famous story from Asser's *Life of Alfred*, of the young Alfred whose interest in books was first kindled by a book of English poetry which his mother read to him and his brothers. The book is promised to whichever brother can remember the poems. Alfred, needless to say, is the winner. We have to wait until the eleventh

⁴⁸ C. Meale, 'Laywomen and their Books in Late Medieval England', in C. Meale (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500* (1993), p. 131.

century to find another mother similarly occupied: Queen Margaret of Scotland reads both to her illiterate husband and to her large gathering of children. In the mid-thirteenth century we come to the rather different example of Denise Montchensy, for whom Walter of Bibbesworth composed a treatise so that she could teach her children the kind of French they would need for 'husbandry and management'. A poem based on Walter's work assumes that 'woman teacheth child on book'.⁴⁹

The fourteenth century gives rise to a new kind of evidence: representations of St Anne teaching the Virgin to read become widespread throughout Europe, but seem first to occur in England. An early example can be found in a Book of Hours of the early fourteenth century where Anne shelters the Virgin with her cloak while the Virgin holds an open book. In the Fitzwarin Psalter of the late fourteenth century 'the female donor kneels before the Virgin's mother, St Anne, as she teaches the Virgin to read as if the donor too is anxious to benefit from the same instruction'.⁵⁰ As has often been pointed out, these illustrations must be viewed with an open mind. Are they what they seem at first glance? Are these scenes evidence of increasing domestic literacy or should they be seen as new iconographical symbols of the Incarnation? Do we have to choose? The one interpretation should not exclude the other, particularly in view of the suggestive ruling during the clamp-down on Lollardy in the fifteenth century that women are to teach only other women and children in a domestic setting. To deny that women undertook precisely the kind of teaching that is here allowed would seem perverse indeed.

The topic of women's literacy promises to be greatly illuminated by the work of Michael Clanchy (in progress). Mention should be made here of the works of the French writer Christine de Pisan (1365-c.1430), herself a mother of three small children whom she was left to support in her widowhood. Five of Christine's works were translated into English in the fifteenth century. *The Moral Proverbs of Christine*, a book for children, that was translated by Anthony Woodville, tutor of Edward V, and published by Caxton in 1478, was the first by

⁴⁹ N. Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry* (1984), p. 16.

⁵⁰ V. Sekules, 'Women's Piety and Patronage', in N. Saul (ed.), *Age of Chivalry* (1992), p. 130.

a woman to be printed in England. Christine's most popular book, however, was *The Epistle of Othea*, in which she restates the classical belief that women (albeit goddesses) are to be credited with the invention of technology, agriculture – and literacy.

The last word, however, on mothers and the education of their children must go not to Christine, but to Heldris of Cornwall, the author of the romance tale, *Silence*, about a heroine who, with the connivance of her mother – and indeed father – is successfully raised as a boy.⁵¹ This thirteenth-century tale, set in England, opens with events that lead the king to decree that in future no woman can inherit. Subsequently the king's nephew Cador falls in love with the beautiful and skilled Euphemie (who appears initially as Cador's doctor). Cador and Euphemie marry and the king promises to give them the duchy of Cornwall, provided they have a son. They accept the terms but work out a strategy for keeping the inheritance even if they have a daughter. Euphemie is to have only one birth attendant, a female cousin, who can be trusted not to divulge the sex of the baby; whether boy or girl Cador and Euphemie have decided that the child will be brought up as a boy. The baby is born – and it's a girl. Told that he has a son but later finding out the truth, Cador declares that 'he wouldn't have given a fig to have a son instead of a daughter for he never saw such a lovely creature'. The child is baptised Silence, a nappy being put on with great care (by Cador) and the priest instructed not to remove it because the infant is sickly. Silence is then sent off to be brought up far from the court, leaving Nature to fume: 'they have done this to spite me, thinking that Nurture is stronger than my work.' And Nurture does indeed do a good job.

As the years pass Silence becomes anxious – will she make a good knight? If the inheritance laws are changed and the deceit therefore becomes unnecessary, will she know how to behave as a woman? Since both men and women can be musicians she decides to run away with a band of minstrels so that she can acquire for herself instruments, 'harp and vielle', in place of what she does not know about sewing – 'working orphreys [embroidery] or ribbons'. The complications of the story multiply; its intricacies need not concern

⁵¹ S. Roche-Mahdi (ed.), *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance* (1992).

us and the outcome will cause no surprise – the truth is revealed and Silence allowed to inherit as a woman. In this sense Nature can claim victory; but it is won only after Silence herself has outshone her male companions as both minstrel and later, perforce, as knight.

Despite recent attempts to read *Silence* as a work underpinned by misogynistic assumptions, the triumph of Nurture over Nature, in the form of Silence's successes as a hero, serves to demonstrate that, however different the parameters, medieval interest in debates about the roles which women and men were brought up to play could be every bit as keen as our own.