

**THE MEDIEVAL MAIDEN: YOUNG
WOMANHOOD IN LATE MEDIEVAL
ENGLAND**

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Abstract

Studies of youth or adolescence within medieval perceptions of the life cycle are of increasing prominence within medieval studies. However, most such studies take young manhood as their point of focus, with less attention paid to young womanhood. In a different vein, studies of medieval women are tending towards greater attention to particular life cycle phases, especially to wifhood and widowhood. With the exception of a few essays, or sections in longer studies, youth as a phase of women's life cycle has received less attention. This thesis takes in both the fields of studies of medieval youth, and of medieval women, in its analysis of representations of young womanhood in late medieval England.

The first task addressed is that of determining whether or not a separate phase in women's life cycle, between childhood and fully-fledged adulthood, existed in late medieval English culture. Having suggested that such a phase is indeed discernable, but that one must not be too rigid in setting its boundaries, representations of the medieval maiden (which is the term preferred here) within a wide range of discourses are examined. The meanings of maidenhood come mostly from groups other than the young women themselves, and each group expresses its own particular interests, desires and agendas in the construction of the various maidenly identities. Thus there is no single, unified definition of young womanhood in this culture. However, certain themes are recurrent, including the degrees of autonomy to which young women had access, and the ideals of femininity to which they were subject. Overall, it is argued that the dominant defining theme of the phase was a tension between the state of sexual and psychological maturity, and the necessity for chastity. That tension could pose problems, but it could also represent a peak of feminine desirability. In this latter regard, it is argued that maidenhood represented a notion of the perfect age of woman.

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List of Abbreviations

- B.I.H.R. - Borthwick Institute for Historical Research, York
- Bracton - *Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England*
- C.L.R.O. - Corporation of London Record Office
- CP- *The Cely Papers*
- CPM - *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London*
- Documenta - Documenta Matris ad Filiam*
- E.E.T.S. - Early English Text Society
- EHD - English Historical Documents*
- Glanvill - The Treatise on the Laws and Customs of England Commonly Known as Glanvill*
- Good Wife - The Good Wife Taught her Daughter*
- Holdsworth - William Holdsworth, *A History of English Law*
- King's Bench - Select Cases in the Court of King's Bench*
- Knight - The Book of the Knight of the Tower*
- LL - The Lisle Letters*
- M.E.D. - *Middle English Dictionary*
- N.R.O. - Norfolk Record Office
- PC - Plumpton Correspondence*
- Pilgrimage - The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage*
- PL 1 and 2 - The Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*
- Pollock and Maitland 1 and 2 - F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, *The History of English Law, Before the Time of Edward I*
- SL & P - Stonor Letters and Papers*
- Test. Ebor. - Testamenta Eboracensia*
- Thewis - The Thewis off Gud Women*
- W.A.M. - Westminster Abbey Muniments
- Year Books - Year Books of Edward II*

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PART ONE: MAIDENHOOD AS A PHASE IN WOMEN'S LIFE CYCLE

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: YOUTH AND YOUNG WOMANHOOD

A maiden childe and a wenche hatte *puella*, as it were clene and pure as þe blake of þe y3e, as seiþ Isidre. For among alle þat is iloued in a wenche chastite and clenness is iloued most. Men schal take hede of wenchis for þey bene hote and moist of complexioun; and tendre, smal, pliaunt, and faire of disposicioun of body; schamefast, fereful, and mury, touchinge þe affeccioun; delicat in clothinge. For as Senec seiþ, semelich cloþinge bysemep hem wel þat beþ chast wenchis [*et cetera*]. *Puella* is a name of age of soundenes wipoute wem, and also of honeste. So seiþ Isidre. For comounliche we vsen to clepe maydenes wenchis. And a maide hatte *virgo* and hap þat name of grene age, as *virga*, 'a 3erde' is iseide as it were *viridis* 'grene'. Oþir a maide hap þat name *virgo* of clenness and incorrupcioun as it were *virago*, for sche knowiþ not þe verrey passion of wommen. So seiþ Isidre¹.

It is unlikely that either John Trevisa, author of this Middle English translation from 1398-9, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, author of the early thirteenth-century Latin original, or Isidore of Seville, the early medieval author to whom both later authors turned as their authority, had extensive day-to-day contact with the *puellae*, maidens or wenchis whom they might have expected to conform to their model of youthful femininity². The image of the young woman as an idealised paragon of feminine virtue might have seemed as fantastical as a unicorn, or as foreign as a dromedary, to the medieval parents of young unmarried women³. And yet this image is important in late medieval English culture because it represents an ideology about the identity of girls and young women. It is an ideology which is presented by an elite and privileged few, and of elite and privileged males at that, yet it is one which may have had its

¹*De puella* in Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *On the Properties of Things*. John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus *De Proprietatibus Rerum*. A Critical Text, 2 vols., ed. M.C. Seymour et al. (Oxford, 1975), vol. 1, lib. 6, cap. 6, pp. 301-2. All references to *De Proprietatibus Rerum* are from this edition.

²John Trevisa was a cleric and intellectual who taught at Oxford in the 1360s and '70s, and was a vicar and chaplain from 1390. Bartholomaeus Anglicus was a Franciscan friar, whose encyclopedia *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (c. 1240) was probably aimed at an audience of friars, but was tremendously widely-read. Isidore was Bishop of Seville in the early seventh century, and his *Etymologiae* was one of the most influential books of the middle ages. See Joseph R. Strayer (editor in chief), *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 13 vols. (New York, 1982-9), s.v. "Trevisa, John"; "Encyclopedias and Dictionaries"; and "Isidore of Seville".

³For Bartholomaeus Anglicus' descriptions of the dromedary and unicorn (rhinoceros), see *De Prop. Rerum*, vol. 2, lib. 18, caps. 36 and 90, pp. 1183-4, 1240-2.

basis in, and some impact upon, wider cultural notions of young womanhood⁴. The key themes of the *puella's* identity as described - her chastity, her purity, the delicacy and beauty of her body, her modesty, humility and openness of manner, and her freshness, incorruption and lack of "feminine passions" - seem fundamental to a late medieval English idea of young womanhood. The implications of this ideal, and the other key themes which defined maidenhood as a stage in women's life cycle, will be the subject of this thesis.

This study deals with young women occupying an ambiguous life cycle phase between childhood and adulthood. They are mostly in their teens, though some of them are in their early twenties. This study seeks first to determine whether or not a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood was a feature of conceptions of the female life cycle, and then to explore some of the cultural meanings given to young unmarried womanhood in late medieval England, suggesting some key defining characteristics of this life cycle stage across the different social groups. This introductory chapter will outline the methodological and theoretical choices which guide the interpretation, survey the field of related secondary literature, and introduce some of the broad lines of argument which will be taken up in individual chapters. My approach to the topic is fairly unorthodox, and requires explanation first.

Methodological Approach

Studies of the stages of the human life cycle are of relatively recent interest in medieval studies and other studies of past cultures, and were preceded by interest among anthropologists. In 1928, American anthropologist Margaret Mead published her study of girls growing up in Samoa⁵. She was prompted by a wave of interest in both childhood and, more especially, adolescence in early twentieth-century America. The sweeping statements which she heard about adolescence, and how it was a "problem" age marked by discontent and rebelliousness, rang warning bells in her mind:

The anthropologist listened to the current comment upon adolescence... [and] heard attitudes which seemed to him [sic] dependent upon social environment - such as rebellion against authority, philosophical perplexities, the flowering of idealism, conflict and struggle - ascribed to a period of physical development. And on the basis of his knowledge of the determinism of culture, of the plasticity of human beings, he doubted. Were these

⁴Trevisa's translation was evidently popular in late medieval England, as it survives in eight complete extant versions and two fragmentary ones; *De Prop. Rerum*, p. xi.

⁵Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Study of Adolescence and Sex in Primitive Societies* (1928; Harmondsworth, 1943).

difficulties due to being adolescent or to being adolescent in America?⁶

Mead's insights are sound, and represent the ideological basis on which most studies of life cycle stages are based⁷. That is, they consider such studies to be valid projects because life cycle stages are culturally determined, rather than being biologically or in some other way absolutely fixed. Therefore, to understand a particular life cycle stage it is necessary to understand, or attempt to understand, a particular culture. This applies as much to studies of past societies (e.g. "history") as to contemporary foreign ones ("anthropology").

The question of how stages in the life cycle are defined in different cultures may be said to be an essentially anthropological one, as it is a question which rejects assumptions both about individual life stages and the life cycle generally, and instead necessitates investigation and analysis of one of the fundamental ways in which human beings understand and organise themselves within a given culture. But it could also be called a sociological question, and has indeed been the subject of interest among many sociologists⁸. It is, among historians, increasingly seen as an important historical question⁹, and literary scholars are adding conceptions of life cycle to their analyses of literary works¹⁰. Art historians, too, are interested in representations of stages in the life cycle within the visual arts¹¹. The question is also a political one. Simone de Beauvoir recognised this in her analysis of how one "becomes a woman" in the movement from girlhood into adulthood, and the implications of this creation

⁶Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, p. 12.

⁷Her empirical findings about young women in Samoan society have, however, been fundamentally challenged, and it has even been suggested that she was lied to by some of the women whom she chose as interview subjects. See Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Cambridge Mass., 1983).

⁸See the introduction and essays in Alan Bryman, Bill Bytheway, Patricia Allatt and Theresa Keil (eds.), *Rethinking the Life Cycle*, Papers from the British Sociological Association Annual Conference on the Sociology of the Life Cycle (Houndmills, 1987), especially Chris Harris, "The Individual and Society: A Processual Approach".

⁹e.g. Michael E. Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought 1250-1350* (Lanham MD, 1989). See below for further bibliographical discussion of works dealing with youth or adolescence in medieval history.

¹⁰e.g. James A. Schultz, *The Knowledge of Childhood in the German Middle Ages 1100-1350* (Philadelphia, 1995). See below for a discussion of the importance of the theme of the "Ages of Man" in literary and other texts.

¹¹I.H. Forsyth, "Children in Early Medieval Art: Ninth through Twelfth Centuries" in *Journal of Psychohistory* 4 (1976), 31-70. Sophie Oosterwijk is completing a PhD thesis at the University of Leicester on the subject of childhood in medieval art.

of feminine identity for the position of women within patriarchal society¹².

A study of young womanhood in late medieval England could thus be considered to fall within the disciplinary boundaries of any or all of the above categories. As an investigation of the cultural meanings of a particular stage in the life cycle, it could employ methods, theories, and some source material from any or all of those disciplines. And indeed, to an extent, that is what will be attempted in this thesis. I begin with a broad question, and a recognition that a broad question such as this necessitates an approach which is broad-based and wide-ranging, rather than closely focused on a particular method, place, social group or set of sources. In other words, this thesis is an interdisciplinary one, where interdisciplinarity is taken to mean an approach which crosses the traditional disciplinary boundaries, both in terms of the kinds of sources which are usually seen as the preserve of a particular discipline, and in terms of the kinds of methodologies and theoretical frameworks within which such source materials are analysed.

A sustained piece of interdisciplinary scholarship might choose to take the source material from one discipline, and the method and theory from another, as Steven Justice takes "historical" records of the 1381 rebellion and uses literary techniques such as an attention to the "fissures" within the texts to reinterpret the background and implications of the event¹³. A different approach might examine a wide range of sources from several disciplines, and apply to those sources a variety of analytical methods, viewed through the lens of different theoretical backgrounds. This latter approach is that employed in this thesis. Sometimes historical analysis will be applied to literary texts and literary analysis to historical texts, and at other times the traditional associations between sources and methodologies are kept. At other times I import methodologies or material drawn from another discipline - from anthropology, art history, and archaeology. In each case my aim is to use whichever tools seem useful in the analysis of a particular theme. Thus, for example, in considering questions relating to the degree of control over young women in their interaction with men, I shall consider the spatial arrangement of houses, and make some use of archaeological theory regarding the relationship between space and social relations¹⁴. In examining ideals of femininity constructed within a range of different

¹²Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (1949: London, 1988), pp. 295-392.

¹³Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley, 1994). Paul Strohm's essays in *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, 1992) also provide exemplary exercises in reading historical texts with the aid of literary theory.

¹⁴See Chapter Three, below.

texts, I shall make use of discourse theory, and apply Bakhtinian notions of the relationship between author and audience in the construction of texts¹⁵. In contrast, when wanting to draw some general conclusions about forms of feminine eligibility among the gentry, I shall employ a statistical analysis¹⁶. Interdisciplinarity is about more than drawing on sources traditionally associated with a number of different disciplines. It also requires consideration of the methods of analysis deployed by those working within a particular discipline, and a recognition that the methodological expertise developed within single-discipline studies can bring analytical depth to a more general, thematic study.

With regard to the source materials employed, the aim has been to pull together numerous strands of representation of young womanhood within a wide range of sources in order to paint a more general, though never all-encompassing, picture. There is no shortage of relevant material available to the student of medieval maidenhood. Legal records, including treatises, statutes, and case material, may be examined for their discussions of turning points within the life cycle, and the relative abilities and inabilities of women of different life cycle stage and marital status, as well as for the identity of the young unmarried woman within narratives of the felony of rape. Theological material concerning notions of moral development and the reception of sacraments, and of the value of virginity, is also relevant. Medical or scientific discourses indicate notions of physiological development, as well as more general theories regarding the nature of femininity. Romance literature, courtly verse, and other literary expressions provide a variety of representations of young womanhood which may be analysed within their social and discursive context. Didactic material, including conduct literature apparently aimed at young women and more general collections of *exempla* or statements on the vices and virtues, also present a particular view of young womanhood. Records concerning young women's work in service or apprenticeship may be examined for their representations of the identity of the young woman in work. The letter collections of gentry and aristocratic families supply a picture of notions of feminine eligibility in regard to marriage within those groups, while narrative legal sources such as ecclesiastical court material provide a glimpse of eligibility among lower social groups. Hagiographic representations of young womanhood provide a powerful image of the maiden as the feminine ideal, while visual sources often support this notion. Material from all these discourses, and some others, will be examined

¹⁵See Chapter Four, below.

¹⁶See Chapter Four, below.

within this study. The examination will not be exhaustive, but will focus on particular themes.

One point of my approach does remain constant, and that is in the theoretical background to the analysis. My theoretical emphasis is on the ways in which gender and class interact, conflict, or become intertwined within concepts of young womanhood. I write out of a conviction of the importance of both feminist analysis and material social context. This work is feminist in that it takes the point of view that the history of women's youth has been neglected in comparison with men's youth, or subsumed within it, and that such neglect must be redressed in order to help restore the balance of power in our understanding, or interpretation, of the past. It is also feminist in that it seeks not to gloss over the power relations which governed women's lives in relation to men. My interest in material conditions and class relations derives from a sense that differences of social status are varied and complex in this period, and must be taken into account within any gender analysis¹⁷. Considerations of class should not be forgotten in feminist approaches to history, nor considered subservient to gender concerns¹⁸. Furthermore, I believe that ideological conditions originate in social and economic conditions, though ideological conditions may then in turn influence the social environment. Therefore, while I will often speak of conceptions of young womanhood, or the key themes which characterise young womanhood, I emphasise that such ideas do not come out of the air but are rather, ultimately, based in economic and other social situations.

Approaches to the History of Youth

Any interdisciplinary approach requires a knowledge of secondary literature from different spheres. This thesis does not obviously fall into any one of the clearly established historiographical groups of works dealing with youth in the medieval period, but rather straddles the interests of several of them. For the purposes of summary here, I shall group the main works on medieval youth to date into three groups. First there are those which make

¹⁷The social divisions drawn here are inevitably broad. Much of my analysis rests on a tripartite social division into "peasantry", "urban society" and "nobility". At times these categories are further broken down, into lower and more substantial peasantry, artisanal and some aspects of mercantile society, and wealthy mercantile, gentry, and aristocratic society. The boundaries between these categories should be recognised as fluid and overlapping rather than fixed. Detailed study of the meanings and identities of different social levels within later medieval English society, and their changes over time, is an ongoing project among medieval historians.

¹⁸Joan Wallach Scott shows how where the earlier feminist tradition sought to suppress all differences (of class, of race) to the fundamental difference of sex, more recent scholarship has emphasised the differences between the experiences of women, "Introduction" to eadem (ed.), *Feminism and History* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 9-13. Susan Mosher Stuard cites feminist medievalists who have indicated complex interactions between the categories of gender and class in their studies of medieval women and work, "The Chase After Theory: Considering Medieval Women" in *Gender and History* 4 (1992), 135-46, pp. 143-4.

youth the focus of discussion, and question whether a separate stage in the life cycle which we might call "youth" or "adolescence" existed in the later medieval period. This field of scholarship combines social history with cultural history, in order to gain a sense of contemporary "ideas" of youth. The second group deals with the literary or philosophical tradition called the "Ages of Man" scheme. This field is less interested in social historical questions, and keeps the focus on sources from "high culture", such as literary works, philosophy and theology, natural philosophy, and art. The third group consists of works of social history which include discussions of young people and youthful activities as part of a wider discussion of social and economic conditions.

i. *Philippe Ariès and the idea of childhood and adolescence*

The grandfather of historical interest in the "ideas" of childhood and adolescence was French historian Philippe Ariès. Some of his ideas were presaged in Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process*, which was published in Switzerland in 1939 but only reached English readers in the 1970s, some ten years later than Ariès' study of childhood in history had its 1962 English translation¹⁹. By the early '70s Ariès had become *the* historian of childhood, and the influences of Elias were largely overlooked²⁰. Indeed, the influence of Ariès has become so strong that whether historians of childhood agree with him or not (or rather, with their reading of him), they almost always feel the necessity to explain his position and their response to it. It is unlikely that Ariès, a self-professed "*historien du dimanche*" and expert on tropical agriculture by profession, would have envisaged how far down the years his carelessly dogmatic statement that "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist"²¹ would have echoed.

Critiques of Ariès are legion, and it is not necessary here to elaborate either his account or the arguments of his critics²². My desire not to go over this ground in detail is borne partly

¹⁹Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (1939; Oxford 1994), esp. pp. 139-45; Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la Famille sous L'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1960), translated as *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. Robert Baldick (1962; London, 1996). Please note that the page numbers of the 1996 edition differ slightly from the Jonathan Cape edition of 1962).

²⁰Elias' contribution has been reassessed recently in Hugh Cunningham's thoughtful survey, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (London, 1995), p. 5.

²¹Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, p. 125.

²²For early critiques see U.T. Holmes, "Medieval Children", review of *Centuries of Childhood* in *Journal of Social History*, 2 (1968), 164-172, and Adrian Wilson, "The Infancy of the History of Childhood: An Appraisal of Philippe Ariès" in *History and Theory*, 19 (1980), 132-53. A substantial revision of the ideas for the early modern period came with Linda Pollock's *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge,

out of an unwillingness to restate that which has been said so many times, and partly because much of what has been said relates to Ariès' arguments about childhood rather than about youth or adolescence. What I will do here is first point out his key points and, more importantly, those areas where his critics have misread or oversimplified his argument. I will then move on to his statements about youth or adolescence, and to the growing body of literature on that subject which his thoughts influenced.

The central thesis of Ariès' work, or that which has been most often turned to and quoted by other writers, occurs in his summary to the first section of his book, called, in the English translation, "The Idea of Childhood":

In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society²³.

This argument derives from Ariès' examination of the ages of man theme, children's dress, their representation in art, their games, and their degree of protection from sex. In the second part of the book Ariès takes the argument further by examining pre-modern education, and arguing that there was a lack of correspondence between age and studies, and thus considers that childhood and adulthood were blurred into one. I do not wish to pick apart any of these arguments, except to restate the already often-repeated point that Ariès makes many statements about the middle ages without a proper examination of medieval evidence. Instead I will focus on three key points from the above quotation, which certain historians have either seized upon or failed to take into account, and thus their tendency to misrepresent Ariès.

The first point is that the phrase "idea of childhood" is a mistranslation of Ariès' original. The original word was *sentiment*, which, as Cunningham points out, "carries with it the sense of a feeling about childhood as well as a concept of it"²⁴. Children did not have their own world, but that does not necessarily mean that they were understood to be the same as adults.

1983). Recent thoughtful summaries of the historiographical material are available in Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, pp. 4-17, and Schultz, *Knowledge of Childhood*, pp. 2-9.

²³Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, p. 125.

²⁴Ariès, *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale*, p. 134; Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, p. 30; Wilson, "Infancy of History of Childhood", p. 132, n. 5.

It seems that Ariès was perhaps more aware that he was comparing past societies with his own, rather than with an absolute, fixed notion of childhood which was only discovered gradually, than certain critics have suggested²⁵. If so, then James A. Schultz's recent, carefully-considered study of representations of childhood in Middle High German texts may bear more similarities with Ariès than he realizes. He argues that we must be prepared to "respect the alterity of the past, acknowledging the likelihood that there are more aspects to childhood than the pair of absences authorized by Ariès" (that is, lack of a concept of childhood and lack of care for children)²⁶. This is absolutely true, but in concluding that in Middle High German texts (and indeed until the eighteenth century) children were considered defective or imperfect in relation to adults, and thus were perceived to belong on a continuum with adults rather than in the special world which our contemporary society allots them, Schultz has perhaps moved less far from Ariès' "extravagant" claim than he thinks²⁷.

The second (and more minor) point concerns the use of the word "medieval". Medievalists seem to have interpreted it according to their own idea of when the middle ages "were". Thus Shultz applies it to the early twelfth to mid fourteenth centuries, Shahar ranges from the early twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, and Hanawalt's work concentrates on the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But it is possible that Ariès would have had little quarrel with some of their conclusions for the later period, because he felt that "the discovery of childhood began in the thirteenth century", and slowly developed until it reached fruition by the seventeenth century²⁸. Ariès' chronology is admittedly sketchy and imprecise, but it should be recognised that what he meant by "medieval" was not necessarily what other historians have meant.

The third point relates to an idea which historians have taken up and enthusiastically challenged: that because children's life expectancies were short there was little incentive for parents to invest their emotions in them²⁹. This idea of the absence of an emotional bond between parent and child was taken up more eagerly by de Mause, Shorter and Stone than by

²⁵e.g. Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986), p. 171; eadem, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford, 1993), p. 7; Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London, 1990), esp. pp. 1-4.

²⁶Schultz *Knowledge of Childhood*, p. 9.

²⁷Schultz, *Knowledge of Childhood*, pp. 249-51.

²⁸Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, p. 45.

²⁹Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, pp. 36-8.

Ariès himself, though it tended to be the latter who bore the brunt of criticism in studies such as that by Attreed³⁰. In such critiques historians seem to overlook the second statement made in the quotation above: "this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea [*sentiment*] of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children". This stands in stark contradiction to the claim of Attreed's abstract, that "twenty years ago Philippe Ariès presented a negative view of childhood, characterized by abuse and neglect"³¹. It seems undeniable that Ariès' argument was confused and unclear on this matter, but it does not therefore do for historians to lay inaccurate accusations at his feet.

This examination of the problems with interpretations of Ariès has not been offered as an attempt to reinstate his theories. On the contrary, I believe his ideas are not sufficiently based in evidence, nor adequately consistent and thought-through, for any subsequent study of childhood or youth to be based upon them. Rather, the aim has been to make a plea for the scholarship on this subject finally to move away from its fixation with Ariès, and to enter a new phase. Ariès' work was not the product of a full time professional historian, and it is time both to stop castigating him for the flaws in his argument and to stop taking his ideas too much to heart. Rather, we should regard him as an enthusiast with interesting ideas who inspired a new field of historical study. It is unnecessary and uninteresting perennially to pick over the worn-out fragments of his argument.

It may, however, be necessary to question why it is that interpretations of his theories have held such appeal for so long, and thus why each new historian of childhood or youth must reinvent the wheel at the beginning of his or her study. *Centuries of Childhood* was given a new edition by a British publisher in 1996, and this edition included a new introduction by Adam Phillips, a child psychotherapist. That introduction does no more than laud the boldness and insight of Ariès' thesis, and pays no attention at all to the thirty years of critiques which have challenged that thesis³². By now, it seems, "everyone knows" that there was no such thing as childhood before the seventeenth century (even though Ariès did not say that)³³. The desire to

³⁰Lloyd de Mause, "The Evolution of Childhood" in idem (ed.), *The History of Childhood* (London, 1976), 1-73; Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London, 1976), pp. 168-204; Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London, 1977), pp. 105-114; Lorraine C. Attreed, "From Pearl Maiden to Tower Princes: Towards a New History of Medieval Childhood" in *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983): 45-58.

³¹Attreed, "Pearl Maiden to Tower Princes", p. 45.

³²Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, pp. 5-8.

³³Schultz notes that during the course of his research into the idea of childhood in medieval texts, he was constantly told that "there was no such thing", *Knowledge of Childhood*, p. 3.

believe this in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary must indicate a contemporary desire to construct the distant past as an *other*, and, particularly on such a potentially emotive topic as childhood and care of children, as less enlightened than our own. It will take an idea as bold and with such contemporary appeal as Ariès' to dislodge his idea, and to enable histories of childhood and youth to swim out of the Ariès net.

Most of the discussion so far has centred on Ariès' remarks about *childhood*, and critical responses to this. But he also commented that, as an extension of his main theme, until the eighteenth century "people had no idea of what we call adolescence"³⁴. The usual interpretation of this sentence, as with the phrases concerning childhood, is that "the Middle Ages did not have a concept of childhood or adolescence"³⁵. But "what we call adolescence" is not the same thing as "adolescence" as an absolute concept. Again, it may be that Ariès was more conscious of the alterity of the past than he has been given credit for. But, rather than dwell on this point, I shall here discuss the historiography of medieval youth or "adolescence", and three approaches which have been taken so far.

The first type of approach bases its arguments around a rejection of the reading of Ariès already mentioned. Thus, Barbara Hanawalt introduces the thesis of her *Growing Up in Medieval London* - the only fully-fledged exploration of childhood and adolescence in the medieval period - by saying that "the Middle Ages did recognise stages of life that corresponded to childhood and adolescence"³⁶. But *whose* idea of childhood, and *whose* idea of adolescence? Hanawalt and others seek and find ideas of the stages of life in their sources which are very similar to those of modern adolescence. While Hanawalt argues that to say that adolescence "was a recognised social construct is not to say that it was the same as the nineteenth- or twentieth-century concept of adolescence"³⁷, she does posit certain continuities between medieval and modern adolescence. One such continuity is her insistence on a clearly demarcated stage which we may call adolescence. Another, although she claims to be loathe to privilege biology over culture, is that "a natural tension exists between the aspirations of

³⁴Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, p. 27.

³⁵Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, p. 7.

³⁶Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, p. 5.

³⁷Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Historical Descriptions and Prescriptions for Adolescence" in *Journal of Family History* 17 (1992), 341-51, pp. 342-3. See also *Growing Up*, pp. 8-9.

youths and the demands of adults"³⁸. The "natural" in this phrase calls to mind Margaret Mead's nervousness about ascribing the natural to what an anthropologist would prefer to see as cultural. Hanawalt is certainly not unaware of the desirability of avoiding assumptions based on present definitions. "A historian's task is to find out how society at the time perceived these stages of life and how it defined them, rather than simply accepting a present-day definition"³⁹. And yet her impulse, perhaps against her own judgement, is to seek continuities rather than change. I have considerable sympathy with her acknowledgement that "I cannot completely erase my own views, despite my knowledge of the period", and think she shows a rare honesty in a discipline where scholars are loathe to admit that their interpretation of the past, however closely based in intensive research, cannot be entirely free of themselves⁴⁰. But it would be better for her to examine her own political and personal reasons for the questions which she asks and the answers she provides.

The work of Kathryn Reyerson on apprentices in Montpellier shares Hanawalt's desire to establish that there is evidence for a separate period of adolescence in that place in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries⁴¹. Her main aim, however, is not to offer defining characteristics of the life cycle stage. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, on the other hand, seem influenced by psychoanalytic or sociological theory when, in analysing the life stages of medieval and early modern saints, they define adolescence as the appointed time for "a contest of wills, a power struggle between parent and adolescent" and as "the onset of maturity and the quest for identity"⁴². Although there are differences between the approaches to adolescence from the historians cited so far, they can be grouped together in the sense that they all derive from a rejection of a particular reading of Ariès, and they all, to varying degrees, seek continuities between the past and the present.

James A. Schultz is slightly different, in that he rejects the notion that there is any concept

³⁸Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, p. 11. This phrase occurs amid her discussion of sociologist Glen Elder, Jr.'s theories of life cycle stages.

³⁹Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, p. 9.

⁴⁰Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, p. 13.

⁴¹Kathryn L. Reyerson, "The Adolescent Apprentice/Worker in Medieval Montpellier" in *Journal of Family History* 17 (1992), 353-370.

⁴²Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 59, 244.

of "adolescence" in the sources of his study (here, Middle High German romances)⁴³. His conclusions are easily misinterpreted though, as he states his case so firmly that it appears he is rejecting outright the possibility of the concept of an intermediate stage in the life cycle between childhood and adulthood. However, as he makes clear in his more recent study, his quarrel is with those who would apply the term "adolescence" to past societies and thus run the risk of imposing modern concepts along with vocabulary, and with those who hold a fixed, twentieth-century definition of adolescence as a time of physiological development and psychological struggle and who try to find this in the past⁴⁴. He perhaps thus, again, does not move so far from Ariès' claim that "people did not have an idea of what we call adolescence". Schultz is right to maintain this scepticism, but I feel that in concentrating on such a narrow range of texts he may miss a great deal of relevant evidence. He is not sufficiently aware of the discursive problems with his sources.

The final author to be discussed in the section, on the other hand, avoids such structures, and provides a nuanced and sensitive reading of youth in Venice which is a model of how studies of life cycle in the past may be carried out. Stanley Chojnacki's article on adolescence and gender in renaissance Venice takes an original approach to the subject of youth in the life cycle⁴⁵. He does not bother to place his discussion within the Ariès debate at all, but rather enters immediately into a discussion of age at marriage and its implications for concepts of adulthood for young Venetian women. It would be difficult for him to take the approach of Hanawalt and Reyerson and argue categorically for adolescence as a clearly defined stage with entry and exit points, as marriage age for women in Venice in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries of his discussion was relatively young (though he does argue that it rose during the fifteenth century, along with an increasing degree of autonomy allowed to girls in their choice of vocation)⁴⁶. He recognises a quite different life cycle pattern between that of males and females - where attaining adulthood was measured by marriage for women, it was measured by entry into the public sphere of business and government for men - but sees a similarity

⁴³James A. Schultz, "Medieval Adolescence: The Claims of History and the Silence of German Narrative" in *Speculum* 66 (1991), 519-537.

⁴⁴Schultz, *Knowledge of Childhood*, pp. 131-2 and p. 132, n. 149.

⁴⁵Stanley Chojnacki, "Measuring Adulthood: Adolescence and Gender in Renaissance Venice" in *Journal of Family History* 17 (1992), 371-95.

⁴⁶Chojnacki, "Measuring Adulthood", pp. 371-8.

between the two in that, in both cases, attaining adulthood was a graduated process⁴⁷. In this recognition Chojnacki makes his most valuable contribution to the field. He argues that, although Venetian women may have married young (soon after puberty, or a little later by the end of the fifteenth century), this does not mean that they were perceived to enter fully-fledged adulthood at this stage. As males took on public posts and duties gradually, so women were "only technical adults, made to appear as such in order to come into their inheritance, so that they might marry, since the dowry was their inheritance"⁴⁸. In fact they entered what Chojnacki terms a "uxorial cycle, from bridehood to mature wife and motherhood, to widowhood". In early marriage they were still quite reliant on their parents, and the children they bore were tended by nurses. Full adult responsibilities came on them gradually. Thus "marriage for women was not the diploma of adulthood but rather the tuition beginning the passage to it"⁴⁹.

These conclusions form a far more imaginative, insightful, and useful way of approaching stages in the life cycle in past cultures. They offer a flexible approach, whereby institutions such as marriage do not necessarily imply the end of a stage we might call adolescence. Moreover, they encourage the historian to be alert to the special conditions of the past, rather than seeking continuities with the present, and to embrace rather than shy away from apparent difficulties or contradictions with the evidence. What Chojnacki's findings offer this present study is an awareness of the complications and contradictions within the evidence, and a sense that in seeking youth as a life cycle stage in the past it is necessary to remain flexible rather than dogmatic, and to recognise that the multiple meanings which different discourses bring to youth are part of the definition of youth, rather than a difficulty in proving its existence.

ii. *The ages of man.*

A number of scholars interested in "high" aspects of medieval culture - literature, philosophy, natural philosophy and art - have discussed the popularity of the "ages of man" scheme within these fields⁵⁰. Briefly, the scheme divides the stages of the human life cycle into three, four, five, six, or seven ages, each age possessing its own peculiar characteristics and defining qualities.

⁴⁷Chojnacki, "Measuring Adulthood", pp. 378-83.

⁴⁸Chojnacki, "Measuring Adulthood", p. 384.

⁴⁹Chojnacki, "Measuring Adulthood", pp. 384-5.

⁵⁰Three authors provide extensive discussions of the ages schemes. They are J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986); Mary Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge, 1986), and Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton, 1986).

The scheme had ancient roots - notably in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*⁵¹ - and was an attempt to incorporate ideas of the human life span within a wider cosmological framework. Thus the four ages scheme, for example, was based in tetradic cosmology, and drew analogies between the four ages of man and the four seasons, the four elements, and the four bodily humours, amongst others⁵². The seven ages scheme, based in hebdomadic cosmology, drew analogies between the seven ages, the seven planets, the seventy years of human life, the seven ages of the world, and so on⁵³. The theme was taken up by vernacular authors, of whom Chaucer is only the most well-known⁵⁴, as well as the influential thirteenth-century encyclopedists Thomas of Cantimpré, Vincent of Beauvais, and Bartholomaeus Anglicus⁵⁵. The extent to which it may have spread to a vernacular culture with a wider audience may be suggested by its presence within a fifteenth-century sermon which was supposedly written to be preached by the Boy Bishop⁵⁶.

The ages schemes included a stage in the life cycle which we might call "youth", but which is normally called *adolescencia* within the scheme. *Juventus* is usually reserved for a later age, which is otherwise known as *maturitas*. Bartholomaeus Anglicus posits seven ages, taking Isidore's scheme as his model⁵⁷. They are *infancia* (which lasts until the seventh year), *puericia* (from the seventh to the fourteenth), *adholescencia* (from fourteen to twenty-one, though he notes that Isidore places its end at twenty-eight and that some physicians place it at thirty or thirty-five), *iuventus* (lasting until forty-five or fifty), *senecta* (without a fixed end point) and *senectus* (ending at seventy), and finally *senium* (lasting until death). *Iuventus* thus marks the mid point of the ages of man, and is generally held in such schemes to represent the *acme*, the peak, or prime of man's life (this will be discussed further in Chapter Five). Trevisa's translation

⁵¹See Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, ed. and trans. George A. Kennedy (New York, 1991), pp. 168-9.

⁵²Burrow, *Ages of Man*, pp. 12-36; Dove, *Perfect Age*, pp. 30-35; and Sears, *Ages of Man*, pp. 9-37.

⁵³Burrow, *Ages of Man*, pp. 36-54; Dove, *Perfect Age*, pp. 10-13, 60-66; and Sears, *Ages of Man*, pp. 38-53.

⁵⁴See J.A. Burrow, "Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and the Three Ages of Man" in idem, *Essays in Medieval Literature* (Oxford, 1984).

⁵⁵See Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age*, p. 39.

⁵⁶John Gough Nichols (ed.), "The Boy Bishop's Sermon at St Paul's, Tempus Henrici VII" in *Camden Miscellany* vol. 7, Camden Society ser. 2, vol. 14 (1875).

⁵⁷*De etate* in Bart. Ang., *De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 1, pp. 291-3.

has it that *iuventus* "is in þe middil amonges ages, and þerfore it is strengest"⁵⁸. *Adolescencia*, or "striplynges age", is physically characterised by hotness and moistness, is associated with the humour blood and the season spring, and is a time of vitality with physical growth and vigour, sexual energy, and imperfect wisdom⁵⁹. As Trevisa says, "it is ful age to gete children, so seiþ Isidre, and able to barnische and encrece, and fonge my3t and strengþe"⁶⁰.

It has been common for both commentators on the ages scheme and historians of childhood and youth to see the ages scheme as applicable to females as it is to males. Shahar's study of childhood in the middle ages takes the stages of *infancia*, *puericia* and *adolescencia* as guides to the structure of lived lives of medieval children - rather than as a primarily philosophical or theoretical theme - and includes female children alongside male children⁶¹. Burrow's discussion incorporates references to female figures - including the *Pearl* maiden, St Agnes and the lady of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* - and assumes that his points about the ages of man are as relevant to them as to male characters⁶². Of all the discussions only Dove's makes the argument that the ages of man is, indeed the ages of *man*, and that its discussion should not be casually extended to representations of women: "we need to remind ourselves that 'man' in the Ages of Man is not normally an inclusive term, and that when I talk about 'man's life' I am not being inclusive either"⁶³. Her point is a particularly valuable one, as it alerts us to the possibility of examining representations of young women without the automatic imposition of the sets of character analysis provided by the ages scheme. Indeed, women's life cycle phases may not have been seen to match those of men at all. What were the "ages of woman"? What defining characteristics did their ages possess, and how did these differ from the male? Taking our cue from Dove, if there is a perfect age of man's life, what was the perfect age of woman's life? What made it perfect, and for whom?

The project to uncover an idea of the "ages of woman" within medieval thought is wider

⁵⁸Bart. Ang., *De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 1, p. 292.

⁵⁹Burrow, *Ages of Man*, pp. 5-54.

⁶⁰Bart. Ang., *De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 1, p. 292.

⁶¹Shahar, *Childhood*, passim. She does note the different ages of puberty for boys and girls - fourteen and twelve [see Chapter Two, below], but on the whole sees the ages scheme as an appropriate one for females as well as males.

⁶²Burrow, *Ages of Man*, pp. 104-5, 112, 173. In his "Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and the Three Ages" he cites the character of Emily as an example of *adolescencia*.

⁶³Dove, *Perfect Age*, p. 25.

than the scope of this thesis. A parallel to the three ages of man scheme - *adolescencia*, *maturitas* and *senectus* - might for women be maidenhood, wifedom and widowhood. The tripartite division of estates of women into maids, wives and widows was extremely common in the middle English literature of the time, and may provide a first clue to the meanings of young womanhood in late medieval England⁶⁴. What stands out is that this scheme categorises women according to their sexual or marital status, in contrast to categorisations of men according to their physical and intellectual state. Where a man is conceived of as an individual unto himself, woman is conceived of according to her future, present or past relationship with a sexual and marital partner. Such fundamentally different conceptions of the life cycles of men and women necessitate separate and comparative studies. Therefore, in this study, notions of women's youth are on the whole considered separately from notions of men's.

iii. *Young women and social history*

The third field of medieval scholarship which feeds into this thesis is the field of the history of medieval women. In the last decade or so it has become of increasing interest amongst historians of women to discuss the stages of the life cycle separately. Thus the recent collection *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* recognises two separate stages in women's life cycles, and *Medieval London Widows* and *Upon my Husband's Death* focus on the last of the three stages⁶⁵. The stage of life which has not attracted close separate study is maidenhood. This thesis will fill that gap in certain ways, though its intention is not to provide a straightforward social history. Important contributions to the social history of young womanhood in late medieval England are discussed here.

The most important contribution has come from Jeremy Goldberg. His interest in the extent to which marriage was an economic necessity for women led him to looking at ages at first marriage in women of the peasantry and lower urban groups, and their economic activities

⁶⁴See for example Geoffrey Chaucer, "Al she be mayde, or wydwe, or ells wyf", "The Knight's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*, lns. 1171, p. 41 and "Of goode wymmen, maydenes, and wyves" in *The Legend of Good Women*, F version, ln. 484, p. 601, in Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford, 1987). All references to Chaucer are taken from this edition. See also Geoffrey de la Tour Landry, *The Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry*, ed. Thomas Wright, E.E.T.S. o.s. 33 (1868), pp. 164, 165, 176.

⁶⁵Sue Sheridan Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor, 1993); Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton (eds.), *Medieval London Widows, 1300-1500* (London, 1994); Louise Mirrer (ed.), *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor, 1992).

in the years before marriage⁶⁶. His findings concerning life-cycle service among young women of these social groups, and their relatively late marriage age, will be cited in many of the chapters below. His work marks out women's early teens to early to mid twenties as a separate stage in their life cycle, particularly for women in towns, characterised by leaving home, finding work and an independent living in service, and varying degrees of autonomy in their choice of a marriage partner.

Of other social historians whose work touches on the theme of young womanhood, Judith Bennett's studies of women in the English peasantry have provided many important insights. Her early research into merchet payments found that significant numbers of servile women paid their own marriage fines, thus suggesting a more autonomous (if a little precarious) economic role for servile unmarried women than had previously been considered⁶⁷. Her further research indicated that adolescence was a time of an unusual degree of legal activity for women, and one in which they shared more economically, legally and socially with their male peers than at other life stages⁶⁸.

Numerous other historians have touched upon the topic of young women in the peasantry in their discussions of leyrwite and merchet payments, pre-marital economic activity, and age at marriage⁶⁹. However Goldberg is one of the few historians to have paid attention to young women in town society, and the question of family structures and identities in towns has generally been comparatively neglected. A recent article by Caroline Barron on the education available to young women in London, some of artisanal level, has however broadened the study of young women in this group⁷⁰. Felicity Riddy's interdisciplinary study of the place of a particular conduct text within "bourgeois" society has also opened up new approaches to the

⁶⁶P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520* (Oxford, 1992), esp. chs. 4-6. See also idem, "Female Labour, Service and Marriage in the Late Medieval Urban North" in *Northern History* 22 (1986), 18-38, and "Marriage, Migration and Servanthood" in idem *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society c.1200-1500* (Stroud, 1992). A brief, accessible version of his ideas about young womanhood is available in "Girls Growing Up in Later Medieval England" in *History Today* (June 1995), 25-32.

⁶⁷Judith M. Bennett, "Medieval Peasant Marriage: An Examination of Marriage License Fines in *Liber Gersumarum*" in J.A. Raftis (ed.), *Pathways to Medieval Peasants* (Toronto, 1981).

⁶⁸Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 71-99.

⁶⁹For full discussion of these issues see Chapters Two and Three, below.

⁷⁰Caroline M. Barron, "The Education and Training of Girls in Fifteenth-Century London" in D.E.S. Dunn (ed.), *Courts, Counties and the Capital in the Later Middle Ages* (Stroud, 1996).

subjects of women, family and household, and change over time⁷¹. Young women of the highest level of town society were included in Sylvia Thrupp's now old, yet not superceded, study of the merchants of London⁷². The upward social mobility of these young women is one of their most notable characteristics⁷³.

Historians of the gentry or aristocracy who have discussed young women of those social groups have focused on their upbringing or education, and to some extent their marriage practice. Nicholas Orme's general studies of medieval education have increasingly come to include consideration of the education of high status girls, both within the natal home and while boarding in other homes⁷⁴. The training of girls during their youth is also dealt with in studies of the gentry families of Paston, Stonor, and Plumpton, whose letter collections, along with the Cely and Lisle papers, provide an unparalleled amount of detail concerning young women's lives in elite groups⁷⁵. Marriage practice among this group has also been considered, particularly in relation to the question of whether economics or emotion had a greater role to play⁷⁶.

This very brief survey of some of the secondary historical literature dealing with young medieval women is merely a glimpse of the wide variety of such material which will be drawn upon in the chapters to follow. There are many other relevant studies - such as those dealing with the law of rape, the canon law on marriage, or the structure of households - which will be of vital importance throughout this thesis. But the foregoing survey provides a sketch of the general picture of young womanhood available so far to social historians. In general, historians have tended to focus on one social group, or a couple of closely related social groups, and thus

⁷¹Felicity Riddy, "Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text" in *Speculum* 71 (1996), 66-86.

⁷²Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London [1300-1500]* (1948; Ann Arbor, 1962), pp. 169-174.

⁷³Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, pp. 265-9.

⁷⁴See especially his *From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy 1066-1530* (London, 1984).

⁷⁵H.S. Bennett, *The Pastons and their England: Studies in an Age of Transition* (Cambridge, 1922), esp. pp. 84-6.; A.S. Haskell, "The Paston Women on Marriage in Fifteenth-Century England" in *Viator* 4 (1973), 459-71; J.W. Kirby, "Women in the Plumpton Correspondence: Fiction and Reality" in I. Wood and G.A. Loud (eds.), *Church and Chronicle in the Middle Ages* (London, 1991).

⁷⁶See especially Keith Dockray, "Why Did Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry?" in Michael Jones (ed.), *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe* (Gloucester, 1986); Colin Richmond, "The Pastons Revisited: Marriage and the Family in Fifteenth Century England", in *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 58 (1985), 25-36.

the pictures we have of women in the peasantry, towns and nobility are different in colour and composition. Young peasant women are mostly known about for their economic position, legal activity, work habits and marriage practice. Women in towns are known about for similar activities, though perhaps with less emphasis on their legal activities. Women of the gentry and aristocracy have been studied for their upbringing and marriageability, and thus we have a picture of the desirable gender characteristics of women of high status groups. This thesis, in addition to examining the meanings of young womanhood, and its place within a wider conception of women's life cycle, aims to fill in the picture of young womanhood across the social groups by considering such questions as the types of gender characteristics desired of women in the lower groups, and the economic role of women in the higher groups. By asking the same or similar questions of young women in all the status groups included here I hope to produce a more rounded view than previously available, and to point out similarities or contrasts which may indicate broader points about the identities of the different social groups.

In concluding this historiographical discussion, it is difficult to state where this thesis falls in relation to previous scholarship. It is neither a work of social history, as with those studies just cited, nor strictly an examination of high cultural discourses, as with the ages of man studies. It attempts to incorporate evidence from both such fields. It perhaps fits best with the works of the first group discussed above, but differs in that it does not sit firmly within the Ariès debate, and in that it is written for a different purpose. Cunningham states that it is easier to write the history of childhood (that is, ideas about the nature of childhood) than about children⁷⁷. He wants to do both. My project is different, in that I do not posit such a strict division between maidenhood as lived, and maidenhood as idealised. I see the two existing, not just side-by-side, but intermingled. I wish to examine the two together in two ways: firstly, to think about the ways in which ideology may have informed practice, and practice created ideology, and secondly to see the kinds of source materials from which we might discern either practice or ideology as, in fact, not so terribly different. After all, we have no access to past reality, only to its representations. For these reasons this thesis avoids labelling as either social or cultural history. It is, rather, an interdisciplinary study of the past with political aims and interests grounded in the present. These will be explained at the end of this chapter.

⁷⁷Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, p. 2.

A Note on Vocabulary

Up to this point I have skirted around the question of vocabulary, and the precise terms which are used to refer to the young women of this study. The thesis title refers to "maidens", and the word "maidenhood" will recur throughout the following pages. The former is a widely used term within Middle English, but the latter has a definition of my own devising. The decision to use the terms "maiden" and "maidenhood" rather than, for example, "adolescent girl" and "adolescence" springs from a sense of the necessity to drop as much cultural baggage as possible before embarking on an examination of a life cycle stage in the past (that this is not an entirely possible task will be discussed in a moment). Those who prefer to retain the term "adolescence" - notably Hanawalt - argue that it is a useful term even though in applying it one refers neither to what medieval writers meant by *adolescencia*, nor to what modern psychologists and sociologists mean by "adolescence"⁷⁸. Precisely *why* the application of this term should be seen as useful rather than simply confusing, when one presumably must invent a third definition for it, is not made clear. Hanawalt argues that medievalists use words such as "feudal" and "family" to refer to medieval structures or concepts that had no such name in the period under discussion, and that therefore "adolescence" is useful too⁷⁹. It may be picky to point out that "feudal" was indeed a contemporary term⁸⁰, but perhaps more pertinent that a history of the medieval "family" which took the absence of this word as an important aspect in defining relationships of kin, lineage, household and affinity, would be rather more interesting than one which insisted that the recognisable nuclear family existed, even if there were no word for it. Hanawalt insists that one need not import modern concepts of adolescence along with the word, but that this often occurs is seen clearly in the interpretation of Weinstein and Bell, and, to a lesser extent, in that of Hanawalt herself - as discussed above.

"Adolescence" is not a forbidden word in the vocabulary of this thesis; indeed, it will make an occasional appearance. My point is that it is more important to take notice of the words which were predominantly used in the period under discussion, and let their meanings aid in the interpretation of the overall theme. "Maiden" (or "maid" or "mai") is a term with wide application in Middle English texts, and while it certainly does not have one single meaning its primary use seems to have been one which best suits my purpose. The *Middle English*

⁷⁸Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, pp. 8-9.

⁷⁹Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, p. 8.

⁸⁰Maurice Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages 1348-1500* (Harmondsworth, 1990), p. 19.

Dictionary gives as its primary definition "an unmarried woman, usually young". "Maid's" primary definition is the same, while that for "mai" is a little different - "a woman; esp. a young attractive woman (married or single)"⁸¹.

Three points may be made from these definitions. "Maiden" was a term most often used for young unmarried women past childhood. It could indeed sometimes refer to a girl who was clearly a child, but this is not its primary definition. When a girl was meant, the term child was often affixed - hence "maid child", "maidenchild". Thus, for example Le Freine in the early to mid fourteenth-century Middle English version of the lay was a "maidenchild" when small, and was one of two "maidenchilder" at birth⁸². Secondly, youth was usually implied. Older unmarried women could be referred to as maidens, but this was not very common. An unusual instance is in the fifteenth-century conduct book *The Good Wife Wold a Pilgrimage*, which refers to the decision not to marry but to "wher thy maydon croun" as a spinster in the secular world⁸³. Here, though, maidenhood seems linked with the third element of its definition, that is, that virginity was usually essential to the meaning of the term. Emily in Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" prays to Diana, "goddesse of maydens"⁸⁴. "Maiden" is almost a synonym for "virgin" in Middle English, but not exactly⁸⁵. In their translation of the thirteenth-century texts on virginity including *Hali Maiðhad*, Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne comment that they have sought modern equivalents of the words they translate wherever possible rather than simply employing surviving (and possibly archaic) forms of the words. However, they saw the need to make an exception for "maiden", since there is no current English word which can mean both

⁸¹Hans Kurath, Sherman Kuhn and Robert E. Lewis (eds.), *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1956-ongoing), s.v. "maiden", "maid", "mai".

⁸²"Lay Le Freine" in Donald B. Sands (ed.), *Middle English Verse Romances* (Exeter, 1986), lns. 87, 196, 214, pp. 237, 240. She is also called a "litel maiden", ln. 139, p. 238.

⁸³"The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage" in Tauno F. Mustanoja (ed.), *The Good Wife Taught her Daughter, The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage and The Thewis of Gud Women* (Helsinki, 1948), ln. 67, p. 175.

⁸⁴"The Knight's Tale", ln. 2300, p. 56.

⁸⁵An exception to the rule that "maids" were virginal, is Langland's Meed the Maid. Her sexually and socially subversive persona stands in contrast to the more traditionally idealised passive femininity of Holy Lady Church: Colette Murphy, "Lady Holy Church and Meed the Maid: Re-envisioning Female Personification in *Piers Plowman*" in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (eds.), *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and all her Sect* (London, 1994). However, her persona is by no means stable, and she is called by different names by different characters and at different moments in the text. The meanings of Meed's maidenhood would require a thesis in itself.

'girl' and 'virgin'⁸⁶. Their reasoning here comes close to my own decision to use maiden rather than another term. It expresses a concept for which there is no easy modern equivalent, and in doing so provides a strong clue to the meanings of young womanhood in this period. The virginity (usually) implicit within the term indicates that their sexual status was a key element in defining this stage of women's life cycle, and it provides one of the twin themes which run through this thesis⁸⁷.

There are other medieval terms to refer to young women, but none are so useful or ubiquitous. "Adolescent" does occur, in the form of *adolescentula*, to refer to young women in two twelfth-century texts which I have seen. In Gratian's *Decretum*, in a passage defining canonical age, he begins a passage, "Si uero in fortiori etate adolescentula uel adolescens", and Christina of Markyate's biographer refers to this maiden as "adolescentula"⁸⁸. Other Latin terms for young women of varying ages are *puella* and *virgo* - terms which the Middle English "maiden" combines into one. The virgin martyrs, whom, I shall argue in Chapter Five, are all young women in the "maidenhood" stage of their life cycle, are called *puella* or *virgo* in the Latin *Legenda Aurea*, but "maiden" in Middle English lives⁸⁹. In legal sources maidens are often simply referred to as *filia*, as it is their relationship to their father which is the most important aspect of their identity in this context.

Anglo-Norman sources, and sometimes Middle English sources too, also use *pucelle* as a synonym for maiden. The word clearly derives from *puella*, but that its sense could be close to *virgo* is indicated in Malory, where Sir Galahad is referred to as a "pusyll"⁹⁰. The term is

⁸⁶Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (eds. and trans.), *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford, 1990), p. xliii.

⁸⁷The medieval maiden is thus different from the *parthonos* of ancient Greek mythology, a young unmarried woman who was normally expected not to have had sexual experience, yet for whom *parthenia* did not necessarily imply physical virginity. Virginity was thus far more central to medieval maidenhood than to Greek *parthenia*. See Ken Dowden, *Death and the Maiden: Girls' Initiation Rites in Greek Mythology* (London, 1989), p. 2.

⁸⁸Gratian, *Decretum* in A.L. Richter and A. Friedberg (eds.), *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, 2 vols. (1839; Leipzig, 1922), Secunda Pars, Causa XX, Questio II, CII; *The Life of Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth Century Recluse*, ed. C.H. Talbot (Oxford, 1959), p. 42. Christina is also called *puella* and *virgo*. For fourteenth- and fifteenth-century examples see R.E. Latham (ed.), *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (London, 1975), s.v. "*adolescentula*".

⁸⁹See for example lives of Margaret, Katherine, Agnes, Lucy and Cecilia in Jacobi a Voragine, *Legenda Aurea Vulgo Historia Lombardica Dicta*, ed. Thomas Graesse (1850; Osnabrück, 1969), and in Osborn Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. Mary S. Serjeantson, E.E.T.S. o.s. 206 (1938).

⁹⁰"The kynge knew well that sir Launcelot shulde gete a pusyll upon his doughtir, which shulde be called sir Galahad", Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver (Oxford, 1971), p. 479. Galahad is also called a "parfyte mayden", p. 495, as is Sir Bors, though in the case of the latter the notion of virginity seems fairly flexible; "for all

often found in legal texts which use Anglo-Norman, and is common in rape cases where its use seems to indicate virginity. In a case from 1321 it is said that one Raymond took a girl named Joan "et li debrusa le Watershad et la foci tout outre, et la fit senglante et ravit sa puselage"⁹¹. An Anglo-Norman alternative to pucelle was *damoiselle*, which also entered Middle English as "damsel" (and was rendered in Latin texts as *domicella*). This term, as diminutive of *dame*, usually referred to maidens of high social rank. Its use in the 1275 Statute of Rapes, "et le Rey defent que nul ne ravie ne prenge a force damoysele dedenz age [ne par son gre ne saun son gre, ne dame ne damoisele de age] ne autre femme maugre seon"⁹², is bound up with its indication of social status, as I argue in Chapter Three below. "Damsel" was not always a synonym for maiden, as it could also refer to the occupation of lady-in-waiting or lady's maid (as I argue in Chapter Three also). Such damsels - or *domicella* - could be married women.

"Wench" seems to have been a term primarily applicable to lower status women. Chaucer's Alison and Malynne are both "wenches", and their predilection for sexual activity would seem to belie Trevisa's description of the *puella* or wench as a figure of ideal chastity⁹³. "Wench" generally refers to women of relatively low social status, especially those when they are unchaste: "I am a gentil womman and no wench" protests May, defending her wifely fidelity in "The Merchant's Tale"⁹⁴. A less common term, but one perhaps just as derogatory (in the north-east of England at least) seems to have been "lass". In an action brought before the York consistory court to enforce a contract of marriage between Robert Chew and Agnes Cosyn, it is said that the main reason Agnes refused to marry Robert was because one of his relatives called her "lass"⁹⁵. Middle English "lass" seems analogous to Middle Swedish *lösk kona* - unmarried woman. It is possible that this retained some disparaging overtones, as it probably

women sir Bors was a vergyne sauff for one...And sauff for her sir Bors was a clene mayden", p. 483.

⁹¹Helen M. Cam (ed.), *Year Books of Edward II*, vol. 26 part 1, *The Eyre of London, A.D. 1321*, vol. 1, Selden Society 85 (1968), p.88: "[he] bruised her watershed and laid her open so that she was bleeding, and ravished her maidenhead". For a discussion of this and other rape cases see Chapter Three.

⁹²*Statutes of the Realm* I, 29, ch. 13, "the King prohibits that none do ravish, nor take away by force, any damsel within age, neither by her own consent nor without, nor any wife or damsel of full age, nor any other woman against her will.

⁹³"The Miller's Tale", ln. 3254, p. 69; "The Reeve's Tale", ln. 3973, p. 79.

⁹⁴"The Merchant's Tale", ln. 2202, p. 165. See also "The Manciple's Tale", lns. 212-220, p. 284.

⁹⁵B.I.H.R. CP. F 189, deposition of Robert Kirkeby of Southburn: "maxima causa recusationis sui fuit eo quod consanguineus ipsius Roberti ipsam vocavit et nominavit lass..." The elipsis in the manuscript may indicate scribal puzzlement, or may simply indicate that there was more which he left out. The latter does not seem very likely.

derived from the Old Norse *löskr*, meaning idle or weak⁹⁶. If the word retained such negative connotations in the villages near Driffield in the Yorkshire wolds, from where the participants in the case came, then perhaps Agnes Cosyn was objecting to being called a lazy and worthless girl - and thus was probably quite justified in objecting to a connection with those who called her that.

"Maiden" has been chosen over any of these alternatives, as it seems to have had a wider application and a meaning which best suits my purpose. It seems to have been applicable across the social groups. Chaucer, for example, can call the peasant Griselda, the town girl May and the noble Emily all "maiden"⁹⁷. "Maid" or "maiden" can also imply an occupational identity, or a religious one, but these seem secondary to its meaning as a stage in women's life cycle⁹⁸. "Maidenhood", however, has a meaning of my own devising. Its closest Middle English counterpart, *maidhede* or *maidhad*, refers specifically to virginity rather than to a life cycle phase, while *maidenhede* refers to physical intactness, a concrete rather than an abstract noun⁹⁹. In coining the term here I do so only for linguistic convenience. It is taken to mean "the state of being a maiden", where maiden takes the definition it does here of a young, unmarried woman. I do not pretend that the authors of my medieval sources were simply lacking in vocabulary when they failed to coin this term. Rather, its lack may be the first clue to the shifting, varied nature of this stage of women's life cycle.

Aims and Structure of the Thesis

I have mentioned a few times that it is important that authors be aware of their own personal and political agendas, and how they influence their scholarship. It only occurred to me in the latter stages of my research how strongly such factors were guiding me through my work. I began with a "pure" sense of the necessity to understand the past in its own terms. I attempted to lay aside all modern notions of "adolescence", "young womanhood" and so on, even the notion that youth is a stage of development and growth in the human life cycle, and instead to retrieve medieval English notions through immersing myself in texts. Slowly I found that where

⁹⁶M.E.D., s.v. "las(se)".

⁹⁷"The Clerk's Tale", ln. 210, p. 140; "The Merchant's Tale" ln. 1623, p. 158; "The Knight's Tale", ln. 2305, p. 56.

⁹⁸M.E.D., s.v. "maid", "maiden".

⁹⁹M.E.D., s.v. "maidehede", "maidenhede".

I first resisted the desire to find an overarching theme, one gradually presented itself to me. This theme is certainly present within the sources, but on the other hand it should be recognised that another scholar may have drawn out a different overarching theme.

I argue that maidenhood was predominantly characterised by a tension between sexuality and chastity. The medieval maiden was a woman caught between the asexuality and innocence of childhood, and the sexual and psychological maturity of fully-blown adulthood. This tension brought in its train concerns about the maintenance of chastity - and such concerns would have an impact on the lives of young women from many, though not necessarily all, social backgrounds - but it was not merely an age which was looked upon with alarm or anxiety by those for whom female chastity had a value. It was also the stage of women's life cycle which was most exalted, in secular literature, hagiography, and in the visual arts. The very tension between the requirement of chastity and the achievement of sexual maturity became a focus of desire in late medieval English culture. This, I argue, is the key to the identity of medieval maidenhood, and she - as an abstract figure and as a real girl - was subject at once to protection and desire. However, I also wish to stress that maidenhood cannot be pinned down to a single identity. Both the social class of the young women under consideration, and the discursive register within which representations of maidenhood are presented, have a destabilising influence on the meaning of this life cycle phase. The subject resists easy, unified labelling. That very instability should be recognised as a central aspect of the meanings of medieval maidenhood.

Within this central theme run two secondary threads. The first is the idea that maidenhood as a life stage may be read as one in which women experienced varying degrees of autonomy in different spheres. The second is that it was strongly characterised by women's relationship to their gender roles, as a time of both learning femininity and of being feminine. Again, class identities and considerations of discourse destabilise these aspects of maidenly identity. In this, it should be acknowledged that the issues of female autonomy and the process of becoming feminine are ones which have dominated the modern feminist movement, and that while such themes are present within the medieval sources, the motivations for analysing them are modern ones.

I see this as not a drawback, but a strength in the present study. For while attempting to represent the past as carefully, thoughtfully and precisely as I can, without *imposing* modern ideas onto it, I recognise that the characteristics of the past which "presented themselves to me" did so because they were the themes which most interested me, and for which I saw the

greatest political potential. I do not shy away from the fact that writing history is a political act, but rather embrace it, and assert that it is a recognition of this fact which makes the study of the past worthwhile. I neither wish to make the past provide lessons for the present, nor to impose the present onto the past, but rather to acknowledge that in questioning, analysing and uncovering the past, we help ourselves to question, analyse and reject aspects of the present, and to make the future in a more aware fashion. Thus the neverending dialogue between the present and the past is presented here not as a problem, nor a simplification, but rather a justification for the whole project.

In terms of structure, the aim has been to keep the emphasis on the themes which seemed most relevant to ideas of womanhood as they existed within the period, and which were particularly widespread. Thus where it would be more usual for a study of youth to include chapters on "education", "training", "work", "marriage" etc., I have incorporated those at different stages within my structure. Chapter Two deals the the "Idea of Maidenhood", and demonstrates that there was a notion of a transitional life cycle phase for women between childhood and adulthood, and that this stage may be noticed even within contexts which at first seem unyielding on this matter, including legal statements on ages of consent and majority, and evidence for age at marriage. In this chapter I wish both to lay out the groundwork of maidenhood as a stage in women's life cycle, and to acknowledge that its definition is not at all straightforward, but is rather shifting and variable and defined according to the interests of particular discourses. This, along with the introduction, forms "Part One: Maidenhood as a Stage in Women's Life Cycle".

The remainder of the thesis is divided into Parts Two and Three, defined by the themes already mentioned. Part Two is called "Autonomy", and includes an introductory section analysing the uses of such notions as "autonomy" and "the self" within a medieval context. Chapter Three, "Degrees of Autonomy" explores ways of thinking about the idea of "autonomy" as it applied to young medieval women of different social groups, the extent to which it was relevant at all, and how it is represented in different discourses. This begins with considerations of young women and work - at home, in service or apprenticeship, or boarding in another house - and the existence of and motivations for control of their behaviour. There follows a consideration of spatial relations, and the degrees to which young women of different status were confined or segregated within households, and the extent to which social class influenced this. The final section deals with the notion of women's physical and legal autonomy within the law and literature of rape, and how class considerations influenced the writing out

of women as subjects in the discourses of rape, so that it became a crime perpetrated against others rather than themselves.

Part Three, "Femininity", consists of two chapters and begins with an introductory discussion on issues of gender and medieval studies, and considers the fluidity of femininity as a concept within different medieval discourses. Chapter Four, "Learning Femininity", focuses on the learning of gender roles during maidenhood, and becoming a woman. That is, it focuses on how, and in what way, young women were encouraged to become eligible for marriage. The influences of class concerns and considerations of discourse will be examined for their impact on ideals of femininity. Chapter Five, "Being Feminine" suggests that maidenhood could be conceived as not the training ground for perfect femininity, but represent an ideal of femininity itself. Here I suggest, picking up Mary Dove's question, that maidenhood could in certain discourses, and for certain purposes, represent the perfect age of women's life. I consider virgin martyr's lives, *Pearl* and representations of the Virgin Mary in support of this argument, and include discussions of such issues as ideals of beauty and their social meaning. In the second part of this chapter, in a section which picks up on a theme which has been running through the thesis, I ask why it was that virginity should have been seen as a feminine ideal. Virginity is examined in both its theological and its social aspect.

A study of the meanings any culture grants to a particular aspect of the human life cycle is bound to contain contradictions and complexities. The aim here is to avoid glossing over such difficulties of interpretation. Yet there are common threads to the late medieval English identity of maidenhood. Some of these, such as the existence of the life cycle phase within contemporary mentality, are not unique to that time or place. Others, such as the idealisation of maidenhood as the peak of femininity, may be peculiarly late medieval, and perhaps peculiarly English. Only a comparative study of the topic for other cultures, and other periods, could establish this. Such issues await further study.

CHAPTER TWO

THE IDEA OF MAIDENHOOD

Where does childhood end and adulthood begin? Is there any process in between? If there is, then what characteristics does this transitional phase have? These are the questions which any study of youth raises. Such questions could apply to the present as much as the past, or to our own culture as much as to foreign ones. There is an idea which pervades many histories of youth or adolescence that a stable, coherent idea of life cycle stages exists in contemporary western culture. This is implicit when historians such as Shulamith Shahar and Barbara Hanawalt appeal to psychoanalytic theory for a stabilised account of childhood or adolescence in the present¹. What they do not take fully enough into account is that such a version of adolescence is the product of a particular discourse. It does not represent an unshakeable truth. Benjamin Spock wrote of adolescents' "rebelliousness" and "rivalrousness with parents", while other empirical, sociological studies conclude that there is little evidence to suggest that this kind of relationship between parents and adolescent children is widespread². The dominant later twentieth-century image is of the sulky, rebellious, half-child half-adult, but while some adolescents certainly fit this description this does not mean that this is what adolescence necessarily *is*.

The instability of modern concepts of adolescence was borne out by responses to the marriage of a thirteen year old British girl, Sarah Cook, to Musa Komegae, an eighteen year old Turkish man, in January, 1996. What was interesting about this event was the different perspectives which informed the responses of different groups. Some, such as Conservative M.P. Peter Luff, who was on a crusade to ban information on sex within magazines aimed at teenage girls, felt the marriage was inappropriate because it was unsuitable for young girls to engage in sexual intercourse³. Some journalists suggested that the match was inappropriate because of a thirteen year old's psychological immaturity⁴. This perception of early adolescence clashed with the perceptions of Sarah, her parents, and the Turkish rural community into which she had married. They all felt that there was nothing improper in the marriage, and newspaper reports indicated that Sarah was enjoying

¹Shahar, *Childhood*, pp. 21-2; Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, p. 11.

²Schultz, *Knowledge of Childhood*, p. 131.

³Peter Luff, letter to the editor, *The Independent*, 26 January, 1996.

⁴e.g. article by Hugh Pope in *The Independent*, 26 January, 1996.

her new sexual identity⁵.

This example is cited as a way of illustrating that the idea of a stable and uncontroversial adolescent identity is a fiction in our own culture. Different, and conflicting, points of view surround the meanings of female adolescence, and depend on who is doing the talking. Versions of young womanhood which operated within late medieval English society were not necessarily unstable in the same ways, but that they were varied and flexible according to context is what shall be examined in this chapter.

Medieval legal theories - serving the interests of groups including the church, the crown, the borough and the seigneur - found it convenient to set ages at which boy and girl children passed from the legal incapacities and lack of responsibilities of childhood, into the abilities and duties of adulthood. Such theories regulated the ages at which young people could be validly married, could take religious vows, could inherit property, and could be held criminally or civilly responsible. The setting of ages of consent, majority and criminal responsibility seem to imply that the different medieval legal codes had little idea of a transitional period of legal responsibility or ability. Taken at face value, such theories could be held to represent a belief amongst medieval lawyers, and within the culture generally, that children moved swiftly from childhood to adulthood with no intervening period of transition or development. This chapter aims to do three things: firstly, to provide an account of the canon, common, borough and (to a lesser extent) customary legal notions of coming of age; secondly, to read these theories as products of particular discourses, and thus to break down any sense that the theories represent comprehensive and stable notions of the transition from childhood to adulthood; and thirdly, to examine events which might be taken to indicate the end of maidenhood - marriage and motherhood - to see at what ages such marriage and motherhood occurred, and what kinds of beliefs about appropriate age and maturity surrounded the theory and practice of these events. Much of the material examined here is at first sight unpromising as evidence for the existence of maidenhood as a life cycle phase, as it is most concerned with defining turning points from childhood to adulthood. This examination aims both to show that such apparently intransigent evidence in fact contains instabilities and gaps which allow for the existence of the phase, and that it would be unwise to attempt to define the beginning and end points of that phase too rigidly.

⁵e.g. see articles by Steve Boggan and Hugh Pope, *The Independent*, 24 January 1996; Hugh Pope, *The Independent*, 26 January 1996; and Sally Weale, *The Guardian*, 27 January 1996.

Turning Points: Ages of Consent, Majority and Responsibility

i. Age of consent: psychological and physiological maturity

Any student of medieval marriage knows that the minimum age at which a woman could be married was twelve. For males the minimum age was fourteen. This age is variously called the age of consent, *aetas nubiles*, canonical age, *pubertas*, and *perfecta aetas*. The law on minimum age at marriage, formulated by canon lawyers and upheld by the church courts who regulated the making of marriages, was developed through a number of texts which sought to standardise and regulate stages of the life cycle by ascribing certain developments to certain ages. Both physiological and psychological developments were considered central to the making of a legally valid marriage. I shall briefly survey the canon-legal principles on minimum age at marriage. On valid marriage generally, it should be noted that in ecclesiastical courts of the later medieval period the Lombard, or Parisian, theory of marriage formation was that which prevailed. Marriage could be legally contracted in two ways - either through the exchange of words of present consent, with no requirement for subsequent sexual intercourse, or through the exchange of words of future consent, ratified through subsequent sexual intercourse⁶. In both cases certain capacities - intellectual or physiological - were required. These capacities were held to be absent in children. Therefore a valid marriage could not be made where one or both parties were below the age at which this capacity was achieved.

In general, the canon law position was that no marriage could be validly contracted by one under the age of seven⁷. Upon reaching the age of seven, which seems to have been

⁶This formulation had gained approval over the earlier theory espoused by Gratian and the school of Bologna, which also held that consent was essential, but that the marriage would not be completed or perfected until consummation had taken place. This theory proved problematic, as it implied that the marriage of Joseph and the Virgin Mary had not been fully legitimate. See James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago, 1987), pp. 236-7, 264-9; R.H. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 26-7.

⁷e.g. Gratian, *Decretum*, Secunda Pars, Causa XXX, Questio II. See also Raoul Naz (ed.), *Dictionnaire de Droit Canonique*, 7 vols. (Paris, 1935-65), s.v. "âge".

However there was room in canon law for the marriage of small children. The *Decretales Gregorii IX* included a chapter, supposedly by the ninth-century Pope Nicholas, which allowed for the marriage of infants in the cradle, if it were for the good of the peace:

"Districtius inhihemus, ne de cetero aliqui, quorum uterque vel alter ad aetatem legibus vel canonibus determinatam non pervenerit, coniungantur, nisi forte aliqua urgentissima necessitate interveniente, utpote pro bono pacis, talis coniunctio toleretur". *Decretales Gregorii IX*, Liber IV, Titulus II, Capitus II, in Richter and Friedberg (eds.), *Corpus Iuris Canonici*. All references to the Decretals are from this edition. See also A. Esmein, *Le Mariage en Droit Canonique*, 2 vols. (1891; New York, 1968), vol. 1, p. 212; W. Onclin, "L'Âge Requis pour le Mariage dans la Doctrine Canonique Médiévale" in Stephan Kuttner and J. Joseph Ryan

considered in some sense an age of reason⁸, a marriage could be validly entered into, but it had a suspended quality - it was not complete or perfect - and upon reaching full age one or another party could apply to have the contract annulled⁹. What was the nature of the "capacity" which was achieved upon reaching full marriageable age?

Gratian - whose *Decretum*, completed around 1140 in Bologna, pioneered the codification of canon law¹⁰ - did not specify the age in years at which marriage could be fully entered into. However he stated that a marriage could not take place before the parties had reached the age of consent, or discretion:

Before the age of consent marriage cannot be contracted.

Where there is not consent on both sides, there is no marriage. Therefore those who give girls to boys in the cradle, and vice versa, do nothing, unless each of the children afterwards, when they come to the age of discretion, consent, even if the father and mother have done and wish this¹¹.

That by *tempus consentiendi* Gratian meant the age of twelve for girls and fourteen for boys is evident from chapters elsewhere in the *Decretum*¹². Here it is clear that the

(eds.), *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Medieval Canon Law* (Vatican City, 1965), pp. 238-9; F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, *The History of English Law, Before the Time of Edward I*, 2 vols. (1895; Cambridge, 1968), vol. 2, p. 391.

⁸Naz (ed.), *Dictionnaire de Droit Canonique*, s.v. "âge".

⁹Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, p. 98. For example B.I.H.R. CP. E 23 and B.I.H.R. CP. E 76, both transcribed in Helmholz pp. 200-204, are actions for the annulment of marriage, both brought by a male after reaching canonical age who had made (or been forced to make) a contract of marriage while under age. The editor of the Stonor letters, Charles Kingsford, notes that in a draft of marriage to be made between Thomas Rokes and an unnamed daughter of Thomas Stonor, that "if Rokes' son at the age of fourteen and Stonor's daughter at the age of thirteen disagree the contract was to be void": C.L. Kingsford (ed.), *The Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483*, 2 vols., Camden Society ser. 3, nos. 29 and 30 (1919), vol. 1, p. 93 (Christine Carpenter has recently reissued Kingsford's edition with a new introduction and some small changes in a one volume edition: Cambridge, 1996. Given the few changes made, and the confusion caused by her two sets of page numbers - her own and Kingsford's - it was decided to cite the earlier edition). It was thus in theory possible for children who had been married under age to dispute the contract upon reaching canonical age, but this was but no means a common or easy exercise for them to undertake.

¹⁰Brundage, *Law Sex and Christian Society*, pp. 229-230.

¹¹"*Ante tempus consentiendi coniugium contrahi non potest. Ubi non est consensus utriusque, non est coniugium. Ergo qui pueris dant puellas in cunabulis, et e conuerso, nichil faciunt, nisi uterque puerorum post, quam venerit ad tempu discretionis, consentiat, etiamsi pater et mater hoc fecerint et uoluerint.*" *Decretum*, Secunda Pars, Causa XXX, Questio II, C.UN.

¹²In his discussion of the age at which a girl could enter the religious life, Gratian argues that up to the age of twelve a girl is subjected to her father's will, and if she takes the veil her decision may be immediately revoked by her parents or guardians. If, however, they take a year and a day to revoke the decision, or moreover if she is "in uero fortiori etate adolescentula uel adolescens" and wishes to serve God,

minimum age at marriage was also the minimum age for entry into the monastic life, and so we may say that twelve was the age at which a girl could embark on one of two adult careers - marriage or the veil¹³. These ages are borrowed from Justinian's codification of Roman Law, which states these ages as minimum ages at marriage¹⁴. It is interesting that Gratian seems primarily interested in intellectual development as a guide to the minimum age of marriage. He makes no mention of physical development nor capacity for reproduction, which one might particularly expect given his requirement that a valid marriage be made by both mutual consent and sexual intercourse. Rather it is in some post-Lombardian texts that we find physical development to be a defining characteristic of marriageable age.

The most significant statements came in the *Decretales Gregorii IX*, a compilation of decretals on canon law collected and promulgated by Pope Gregory IX in 1234, which devotes fourteen decretals to *desponsatio impuberum*¹⁵. This collection, unlike the *Decretum* of Gratian, would acquire special authority and application in the universities and courts of medieval Europe¹⁶. The third chapter quotes Isidore of Seville, and his etymological definition of the age of puberty based on physical condition:

Adults are, in respect to marriage, those who are able to conceive and procreate from the condition of the body.

Adults (*puberes*) are named after the pubes, that is after the modesty of the body: because these places first become downy. Certain people think that puberty is determined by years, that is, he is an adult who has completed fourteen years, even though he is late in showing physical signs of puberty. What is certain is that someone who demonstrates his puberty from the condition of his body, and is able to generate seed, is an adult. And there are women in childbed who are able to give birth in

then her parents may not prevent her, *Secunda Pars Causa XX. Questio II, C.II*. The same notion of intellectual development seems present in his statement that under age children - "pueri ante quatuordecim annos" or "puella..., si in puerili etate sita in domo patris", may not be compelled to testify, *Secunda Pars, Causa XXII, Questio V, C.XV*.

¹³Thomas Aquinas appeals to the authority of Gratian, in his discussion of the age at which boys and girls could choose to enter the religious life, *Summa Theologiae* (London, 1973), 2a 2ae, 189, 5, response, p. 245.

¹⁴M.K. Hopkins, "The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage" in *Population Studies* 18 (1965), 309-327, p. 313; Onclin, "L'Âge Requis", p. 237.

¹⁵*Dec. Greg. IX.*, Lib. IV. Tit. II.

¹⁶Brundage, *Law Sex and Christian Society*, p. 237.

childish years¹⁷.

This passage suggests greater flexibility in the definition of maturity than a simple age in years. That twelve was still, however, the age around which concepts of a girl's age at maturity was based, seems apparent from the other decretals in this section¹⁸.

Puberty as a mark of incipient adulthood would become important in cases of disputed marriage on the grounds of age, as will be seen in a case to be discussed below. The canon-legal definition of a girl's age at puberty, drawn from Roman law and Isidore of Seville, does not, however, correspond precisely with later medieval English scientific or medical opinion. There, twelve is rather at the lower end of the scale of a girl's age at first menstruation. Some of the versions of Trotula's *De Mulierum Passionibus* hold that menstruation begins at thirteen or fourteen (or sometimes earlier or later), and others drop the age as low as twelve, while the *De Secretis Mulierum* of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus gives twelve, thirteen or fourteen as frequent ages at menarche¹⁹. The Trotula text, at least, seems to have been widely read in England to judge by the number of extant manuscripts²⁰. There is, however, a possibility that English versions of the Trotula text raised the stated age of menarche a little. John Post has examined the twelve English Trotula manuscripts now in Oxford which include the statements on menarche and menopause, and in none of them is twelve stated as the lowest age²¹. Rather, the ages range from thirteen to fifteen²².

¹⁷"*Puberes sunt quoad matrimonium, qui ex habitu corporis concipere et generare possunt.*

Puberes a pube sunt vocati, id est a pudentia corporis nuncupati: quia haec loca primo lanuginem ducunt. Quidam tamen ex annis pubertatem existimant, id est, eum esse puberem, qui XIV annos implevit, quamvis tardissime pubescat. Certum autem est, eum puberem esse, qui ex habitu corporis pubertatem ostendit, et generare iam potest. Et puerperae sunt, quae in annis puerilibus pariunt." *Dec. Greg. IX.*, Lib. IV. Tit. II. Cap. III.

¹⁸See caps. VI, X-XII, XIV.

¹⁹Trotula, *Curandarum Aegritudinum Muliebrium, Ante, In, et Post Partum in Medici Antiqui* (Venice, 1547), f. 71; J.B. Post, "Ages at Menarche and Menopause: Some Mediaeval Authorities" in *Population Studies* 25 (1971), 83-7, p. 85; Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's De Secretis Mulierum*, ed. and trans. Helen Rodnite Lemay (Albany, 1992), pp. 69-70.

²⁰Post has counted eighteen in Oxford libraries alone, "Ages at Menarche and Menopause", p. 85.

²¹Post, "Ages at Menarche and Menopause", p. 85. For an alternative view to Post on the low age at menarche see Peter Laslett, "Age at Sexual Maturity in Europe since the Middle Ages" in idem, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1977). A general statement on medical authorities' stated ages of menarche from late antiquity to later medieval Europe is available in Darrel W. Amundsen and Carol Jean Diers, "The Age of Menarche in Medieval Europe" in *Human Biology* 45 (1973), 363-9.

²²Post, "Ages at Menarche and Menopause", p. 85. Four of the texts cite thirteen, seven cite fourteen and one cites fifteen as the age of menarche.

Post seems wary of drawing strong conclusions from his findings, except to remark that in late medieval England the age at menarche was the same as at his time of writing²³. One wonders, though, if the absence of the age twelve from the English versions of the text indicates an English age at menarche slightly later than continental counterparts²⁴. It seems unlikely that the content of the text would have been changed without conscious reason. There are a handful of later medieval English texts which suggest twelve as a minimum age at menarche, as Post points out²⁵, yet the later ages suggested by the English Trotula manuscripts should not pass unremarked. Only an exhaustive comparative study of manuscripts citing ages at menarche could allow for a strong statement on this matter, but perhaps it is possible that canon-legal pronouncements on a girl's age at physical maturity, and thus of consent to marriage, were not entirely commensurate with English ideas or English girls' experience of age at menarche. The context of the production of the canon-legal texts under discussion - twelfth- and thirteenth-century Italy - and the lower age at marriage of girls there, may have produced legal pronouncements on puberty which were not entirely suitable for English maidens²⁶.

The difference between the ages of consent for boys and girls may be partly accounted for by their relative ages at puberty. The lower age of consent for girls was drawn directly from Roman law, but canon lawyers must have been influenced by aspects of their own culture in maintaining this difference. The thirteenth-century canonist Hostiensis, puzzling over the question of why girls achieve puberty earlier than boys, provided a biological explanation. Females were colder and more adaptable than males, and therefore matured more quickly but died at an earlier age²⁷. It is possible that social, rather than biological, factors also influenced the difference in ages. It would make sense that the traditional hierarchy of male over female was echoed in the hierarchy of age over youth. There was no question that a wife should be subject to the authority of her husband, and so perhaps it was more appropriate for the dominant partner in the marriage to have the authority of age.

²³Post, "Ages at Menarche and Menopause", p. 87.

²⁴This is a reading suggested to me by Dr Peter Biller.

²⁵Post, "Ages at Menarche and Menopause", pp. 86-7.

²⁶The different average marriage ages of women in Italy and England is discussed below, p. 59.

²⁷Brundage, *Law Sex and Christian Society*, p. 434.

Physical maturity was only one aspect of the canon-legal concept of the age of consent. Psychological maturity - upon which the notion of consent depended - was given considerable attention in the decretals dealing with under age marriage. These seem to draw on the work of Huguccio, working in the late twelfth century, who argued that in some cases marriage and the taking of religious vows could be valid even where the boy or girl was below canonical age, so long as that boy or girl was *doli capax* (capable of trickery, fraud or cunning), because in such a case *malitia supplet aetatem* (wickedness compensates for age)²⁸. This implies the attainment of a knowledge of the difference between good and evil, because to be capable of wickedness one must be knowledgeable about wickedness. One cannot be found morally culpable without the ability to make moral judgements. This idea introduced flexibility into the canon law on age at marriage, and the problems such flexibility arouses are the subject of several of the decretals in this section, in which *malitia* or *prudencia* compensate for lack of age in years²⁹. The decretals also introduce the legal loopholes which could allow for the marriage of under age parties if it could be shown that they were capable of sexual intercourse, of conception, or were *proximus pubertati* - that is, within about six months of canonical age³⁰.

A case brought before the York consistory court in 1365 illustrates many of the theoretical themes which have been discussed so far³¹. An action for the restitution of conjugal rights brought by John Marray against the guardian of his young wife, Alice de Rouclif who had been taken away by a relative, Sir Brian de Rouclif, it is an excellent example of the use of canon law on under age marriage by the group whose interests the

²⁸Onlin, "L'Âge Requis", p. 241.

²⁹See for example *Dec. Greg. IX*, Lib. IV. Tit. II. Caps. IX and XIV.

³⁰On sexual intercourse as grounds for marriage below canonical age see *Dec. Greg. IX.*, Lib. IV. Tit. II. Caps. VIII and IX. On the ability to conceive as grounds for under age marriage see William Lyndwood's 1430 discussion, in which he claims that even a girl of seven could enter a valid and complete marriage in the unlikely event that she proved capable of conceiving at that age, in his *Provinciale (seu Constitutiones Angliae)* (Oxford, 1679), p. 272 s.v. "*non pervenerit*". See also Esmein, *Le Mariage* 1, p. 213. On *proximus pubertati* see *Dec. Greg. IX.*, Lib. IV. Tit. II. Caps. VI, IX; Esmein, *Le Mariage* 1, pp. 213-214; Onclin, "L'Âge Requis", p. 242.

³¹B.I.H.R. CP. E 89. For a translation of many of the depositions contained in the roll see P.J.P. Goldberg (ed. and trans.), *Women in England, c. 1275-1525* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 58-80. I owe this reference to Dr Jeremy Goldberg, and am grateful for his assistance.

law predominantly served - the nobility³². The case for Alice's guardian was that Alice was under canonical age at the time of the contract, and continued to be so at the time of the case, and thus could not have made a valid marriage. The case for John Marray's was that Alice was indeed under age at the time the contract was made, but had since turned twelve, and that she had indicated her consent to the match and ratified it through sexual intercourse.

The case provides rare detail in illustrating the ways in which canon legal theory could be turned to legal practice. The events in the church courts probably did not simply mirror legal theory, yet it appears that legal texts such as those I have been examining did have a close relationship with the practice of law in the courts. From the late thirteenth century little was added to the canon law on marriage and the authority of the established texts became stable³³. Helmholz and Maitland claim that the prescriptions of the authoritative texts formed the basis for procedure and judgement within the courts, and Helmholz has found that most English ecclesiastical judges (though not necessarily the lawyers) held university degrees in canon or civil law or both, and that some of them at least possessed their own copies of canon-legal texts³⁴.

John Marray's lawyers made use of three main lines of argument: proving that Alice has come of age, proving that the marriage has been consummated and thus ratified, and proving that Alice provided her consent to the match. To prove the first, the case relied on the testimony of witnesses who claimed to remember Alice's birth, and by relating it to events in their own lifetimes could state her age³⁵. Proof of Alice's nubility was also offered

³²Here, and throughout this thesis, "nobility" encompasses both the upper and lower nobility - the aristocracy and gentry. The question of the appropriate terms for the upper echelons of medieval English society has been much debated, but for my purposes the broad definition offered by Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1987), p. vii, seems appropriate. "Aristocracy" and "gentry" will be the terms used where greater specificity is required.

³³Brundage, *Law Sex and Christian Society*, p. 419; Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, ch. 6.

³⁴Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, p. 165; F.W. Maitland, *Roman Canon Law in the Church of England. Six Essays* (London, 1898), pp. 1-2; R.H. Helmholz, *Canon Law and the Law of England* (London, 1987), pp. ix, 142-3.

³⁵Before the introduction of registers of baptism in the mid-sixteenth century many legal proofs of age relied on memory and oral testimony. See M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 224-5.

by two witnesses who claimed that she showed clear physical signs of puberty³⁶. Furthermore, the evidence that John and Alice had slept together is useful in the canon-legal context, both to show that the marriage - though originally contracted while Alice was under age - had been ratified by the act of intercourse, and to indicate Alice's physical ability to engage in sex which in turn proved her nubility³⁷. The evidence that she had given her consent to the match also indicated that the contract was ratified by the time Alice reached canonical age, and may also have been useful in indicating that she was of sufficient intellectual maturity to make a fully binding marriage³⁸. The case for Alice's guardian was more straightforward, and focused on proving that Alice had not yet come of age, and could thus not lawfully have ratified the marriage either by intercourse or verbal consent. This case must have been rather weak, as even if her age in years could have been proven against the testimony of the witnesses for John Marrays, it must have been apparent that she was *proxima pubertati*, close enough to canonical age for the stated ratifications of the contract to have been made valid.

The legal complexity of the case and deft arguments of the cases for both sides should not blind us to what was essentially a straightforward power struggle between Elena de Rouclif (Alice's mother) and Sir Brian de Rouclif for control over the marriage of Alice, a young heiress. The social status of the participants in the case should also alert us to the unusual nature of the case. Cases of impediment to marriage on the grounds *infra annos nobiles* are far from commonplace in the English records, and it is dangerous to assume from such a case as this that girls were frequently married at extremely young ages³⁹. The canon law on minimum age at marriage was of interest to legal scholars, but touched the lives of only a tiny minority of English girls or boys.

Evidence of both physiological and psychological maturity was important in the case of Alice de Rouclif, in attempts to prove her capacity to consent. Consent implies a degree

³⁶Anabella Wasteleyne says Alice looks fourteen by her physical appearance, and the Abbot of St Mary's says he knows she is of age both by the account of others and by her appearance, "as anyone examining her can clearly see"; see Goldberg (ed. and trans.), *Women in England*, pp. 61, 62.

³⁷See depositions of Elena de Rouclif (Alice's mother), Anabella Wastelayne, the Abbot of St Mary's and John Fische.

³⁸See depositions of Beatrix de Morland, John Fische, and Robert de Rouclif (Alice's brother).

³⁹Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, pp. 98-9, says few cases of reclamation against marriages made in childhood appear in the Act Books, either because few were made or many which were did not come before the court. It is also possible that few were made because of the relatively low proportions of individuals marrying in childhood.

of moral maturity, or the attainment of a sense of right and wrong, and is a consideration which we will encounter again in regard to ages of majority and criminal responsibility. But it also seems to have had relevance beyond a purely legal context. Canon-legal theory should not be seen as isolated from other theological ideas concerning age, but rather as overlapping with other ecclesiastical notions of maturity. The ages of reception of the sacraments of confirmation, penance, and eucharist may be taken as examples. The key statement on the first reception of penance and eucharist for the later medieval period was made at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, whose "omnis utriusque sexus" passage would become the definitive statement on the confession of the laity⁴⁰. All the faithful of both sexes were to make their confession before a priest once a year as soon as they attained the *annos discretionis*⁴¹. Unlike *aetas nubiles*, the years of discretion were not precisely defined according to age in years. Hence the age could be, and was, variously interpreted by later authors. Some set it at seven, others saw it as equivalent to the age of puberty, and others set it in between⁴².

The minimum age at confirmation had, if anything, an even longer and more complex history⁴³. The early medieval principle that it should take place on the same day as baptism - both sacraments performed by the bishop at the Paschal or Pentecostal vigils - was replaced by the later medieval principle that baptism should be performed by a local priest as soon as possible after birth, and the inaccessibility of the bishop at most baptisms led to a gradual increase in the number of years elapsing between baptism and confirmation. By the fourteenth century the church, perhaps making a virtue of necessity, began to

⁴⁰H.C. Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church*, 3 vols. (New York, 1896), vol. 1, p. 230.

⁴¹"Concilium Lateranense IV" in *Sacrosancta Concilia*, 15 vols. (Paris, 1671), vol. 11, part 1, cols. 172-3, cap. 21.

⁴²Lea, *Auricular Confession* 1, pp. 400-2, and Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, 1977), p. 70, n. 1, provide summaries of the opinions of canon legal commentators on minimum age at confession. J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West*, Alcuin Club Collections 47 (1965), pp. 105-6, cites the varying opinions of church councils from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which variously specified seven, ten and fourteen as the age of discretion. Lea detects a tendency to lower the age from around fourteen in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to around seven by the reformation, but I do not know if such a trend could be detected in English sources. In the mid-sixteenth century the Council of Trent did no more than reiterate that confession should be made at the age of discretion.

⁴³The following is based on Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, pp. 101-37, and to some extent on Nicholas Orme, "Children and the Church in Medieval England" in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994), 563-587, pp. 573-6.

recommend seven as a *minimum* age at confirmation, and by the sixteenth century confirmation below seven was prohibited by the Council of Trent. The 1549 English Prayer Book required that children be able to demonstrate a certain level of doctrinal instruction before they be confirmed. The perception of the nature of the sacrament had dramatically changed from its inception, and by the later middle ages a strong emphasis was placed on the abilities of the recipient, and her or his intellectual or moral readiness to enter the church as a full participant.

The trend with each of the three sacraments was towards a notion of the psychological maturity necessary for the sacraments' reception. Often, later medieval commentators felt that all three sacraments went together. William of Pagula, in his influential mid-fourteenth-century handbook, stated that no one should be admitted to the eucharist before confirmation, that confirmation should take place at "perfect age, i.e. twelve or fourteen years old", and should be preceded by confession⁴⁴. That is, all three sacraments should be received around canonical age, with confession first, followed by confirmation, then communion. That these guidelines were far from universally agreed upon, however, is indicated in the handbook of William's successor, John de Burgh, who in the late fourteenth century pushed the desirable age at first eucharist and confirmation down to around ten or eleven, while maintaining that first confession should take place at twelve or fourteen, dependent on sex⁴⁵. He argued, on the first point, that it is at around ten or eleven that "signs of discretion and reverence towards the sacrament appear in them"⁴⁶. Overall, there seems to have been a growing sense of a need to delay the conferring of the sacraments until the recipient had reached an appropriate level of understanding. The opinion of John Myrc, who in the mid-fifteenth century advised that children be confirmed "wyth-ynne the fyfþe 3ere", seems unrepresentative of the later medieval trend⁴⁷.

It should be noted that in all the sacraments discussed here - marriage, eucharist, confession and confirmation - there is a strong notion of the idea of transition or development. But that transitional or developmental phase occurs, for boys and girls, mostly between the ages of seven and twelve or fourteen - that is, within *puericia*, the second stage

⁴⁴Orme, "Children and the Church", pp. 573, 576.

⁴⁵Orme, "Children and the Church", pp. 573, 576.

⁴⁶Orme, "Children and the Church", p. 573.

⁴⁷John Myrc, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Edward Peacock, E.E.T.S., o.s. 31 (1868), p. 7.

of life according to the seven ages of man scheme. Thus within the clerical ethos, the transition from the childhood state of incapacity and lack of responsibility to adult abilities and duties occurs relatively early - earlier, on the whole, than within the secular legal traditions, as we shall see. It has already been noted that the canon legal idea of female age at puberty was lower than, or at the low end of, the ages suggested within scientific and medical discourse. In general, canon-legal theory and practice does not express much interest in an intermediary stage between childhood and adulthood for either boys or girls. The age of puberty, or consent, seems rather to mark a defined turning point into adulthood. We shall have to go beyond canon law to find the life cycle phase of maidenhood or adolescence. But perhaps canon law provides us with something of an entry point for that phase, a point at which childhood is left behind. This point is around the age of twelve for girls, though in some circumstances it could be lower. Other discourses, however, will tell a different story.

ii. Ages of majority and responsibility in secular legal codes

Where canon law controlled the minimum ages at marriage and entry to monastic life, the secular codes of common, borough and customary law regulated the ages at which one could inherit property, chattels and titles, leave wardship, be tried for felonies, or be held responsible for debts or other civil business. As in canon law, the ages at which girls and boys could reach their majority or be held legally responsible differed, with the age for girls regularly lower than for boys. But where the canon law set a uniform age of consent, applicable across all social levels, the secular legal codes took social status as an important consideration in setting minimum ages. Also, the secular codes did not share the canon-legal consistency and clarity in the setting of minimum age, and instead reveal considerable debate over such matters. In this section I shall simply provide a summary of the ages of majority and responsibility within the secular legal codes, before moving into a more socially contextualised analysis of both canon and secular law in the second part of the chapter.

To begin with common law, it should be noted that the status of common-legal treatises was rather less authoritative in the practice of law than the major canon-legal texts were in the practice of canon law. The so-called "common law" comes down to us in a handful of treatises written by legal scholars, in parliamentary statutes, and in the records of court proceedings recorded by clerks, who were sometimes students taking notes for

their own benefit⁴⁸. Thus to speak of "the law" in this context is to imply coherence and unity where only a little existed. Treatises and case material will be examined here as evidence for ideas about "full age", but it should not be thought that common legal ideas on such matters were set in stone.

The clearest statements on age of majority in common law are to be found in the treatises *Glanvill* and that of "Bracton". The treatise which for convenience is normally labelled *Glanvill* is of unknown authorship, but was probably written between 1187 and 1189 by an author learned in law, and knowledgeable about the contemporary practice and usage of the king's court at the Exchequer⁴⁹. The treatise by an author conventionally known as "Bracton", but who was probably Justice Henry de Bratton, was written in the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Its forty-six surviving manuscripts attest to its popularity in the later thirteenth and first half of the fourteenth century, though after that the rise of the parliament as a legislative body saw a decline in its influence⁵⁰.

Glanvill and Bracton, the latter closely following the former, explain the customary age of majority for males in terms of social position. The sons and heirs of knights and tenants of military fees were said to reach full age when they had completed their twenty-first year, the sons and heirs of sokemen when they completed their fifteenth year, and the sons of burgesses when they could count money properly, measure cloth, and perform other tasks related to their fathers' business⁵¹. No age of majority is specified for more humble tenants and serfs. Bracton later explains the reasoning behind the differing ages of majority for sons of sokemen and sons of knights, saying that while sokemen require strength as well as the "discretion and understanding" to enable them to carry out the duties of husbandry, "those that pertain to military service require greater strength, and greater understanding and discretion, that the heir in military service be of sufficient vigour to bear

⁴⁸On the status of common-legal texts including legal treatises, statutes and year books, see J.H. Baker, *Introduction to English Legal History* (2nd edn; London, 1979).

⁴⁹*The Treatise on the Laws and Customs of the Realm of England Commonly Called Glanvill*, ed. and trans. G.D.G. Hall (London, 1965), p. xi. The name *Glanvill* derives from Ranulph de Glanvill, justiciar from 1180, to whom the work was formerly attributed, pp. xxxi-xxxiii.

⁵⁰Henry de Bracton, *Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England*, ed. G.E. Woodbine, trans. Samuel E. Thorne, 4 vols. (Cambridge Mass., 1968), vol. 1, p. 1; Theodore F.T. Plucknett, *A Concise History of the Common Law* (1929; London, 1956), pp. 258-64.

⁵¹*Glanvill*, p. 82; Bracton 2, p. 250, Pollock and Maitland 2, p. 438; William Holdsworth, *A History of English Law*, 16 vols. (1908; London, 1942), vol. 3, p. 510.

the arms appropriate to his military duty"⁵². This passage betrays Bracton's prejudice towards the aristocracy, and below I examine the implications of this bias of the common law generally as it applies to women and their age of majority. It should also be noted that Bracton's fine distinctions between the ages of majority for males according to social position did not necessarily hold in practice. In a case from the court of common pleas in 1310 there was some dispute over whether fourteen or twenty-one was the correct age of majority for a boy in socage⁵³. Holdsworth argues that the age of majority in the knightly class - twenty-one - came to apply to all classes, and so the law for the elite came to be the law for all⁵⁴.

To some extent, the age of majority for females was conceived from similar principles as those which defined it for their brothers. Bracton describes full age for women in socage as "whenever she can and knows how to order her house and do the things that belong to the arrangement and management of a house, provided she understands what pertains to 'cove and key', which cannot be before her fourteenth or fifteenth year, since such things require discretion and understanding [*discretio et sensum*]"⁵⁵. The age of majority for women in socage is essentially the same as for their brothers, though the requirement of physical maturity is not mentioned. Bracton claims the age of majority for the daughters of burgesses was also generally held to be the same as that for their brothers⁵⁶, that is, not a fixed age in terms of years but rather an age at which she becomes capable of carrying out the tasks required of a woman of her station.

But on the matter of the age of majority for daughters of holders of a military fee, Bracton expresses some disquiet. By his account it would seem that in general the age was held to be fifteen, for then "she can order her house and marry a husband, who, by himself or by another, can perform the military obligations", and that she achieves full age earlier than men of her station "because she is held legally responsible for her actions earlier than a man, and because she is ready for marriage earlier than a man". A later passage on proof of full age, where he states that kinsmen of the individual in question must swear that he

⁵²Bracton 2, p. 251.

⁵³F.W. Maitland (ed.), *Year Books of Edward II*, vol. 2, 2 and 3 *Edward II, A.D. 1308-9 and 1309-10*, Selden Society 19 (1904), pp. 157-62.

⁵⁴Holdsworth 3, p. 510.

⁵⁵Bracton 2, p. 251.

⁵⁶Bracton 2, p. 251.

is fully twenty-one years and more, and, if female, that she has reached fourteen or fifteen years and more, also indicates that it was common-legal practice to grant an heiress of a military fee her inheritance six or seven years earlier than a male heir⁵⁷. Bracton, however, is not happy with this theory, saying it implies the woman could reach full age at twelve, the age of consent, and that "below the lawful age of twenty-one years she could plead and be impleaded by writ of right", a prospect which he finds unacceptable. His feeling is that women under military fees should reach the age of majority at twenty-one⁵⁸.

It was not only Bracton who found the law on female age of majority in regard to military fees confusing and unsatisfactory. The author of the idiosyncratic *Mirror of Justices* (c.1289) held that "it is an abuse that the inheritances of female heirs are kept in ward just as though they were those of male heirs, and this although they be hauberk fees [knight's fees], whereas a woman attains full age at fourteen"⁵⁹. A number of examples from the common law courts indicate that hard and fast rules on female age of majority were not evident. In the case *Frowyk v. Leuekemore*, brought before the court of common pleas in 1310, it is stated that "the same age is fixed for the tenant in socage that is fixed for the female tenant in chivalry to have her land - namely, the age of fourteen years"⁶⁰. Yet in the proof of age of an heiress from 1329, it is proved that Alice, daughter and co-heiress of the late Peter de Southcherche, "is twenty-one" (the proof shows that she was indeed twenty-five. The point of the phrasing is to show that she is over twenty-one)⁶¹. In a later text, the will of Margaret Paston (dated 1482) bequeathes to Custaunce, bastard daughter of John Paston, "whan she is xx yer of age x marc", an inheriting age which fits neither of the suggested female ages of majority precisely, but is much closer to the older⁶².

It seems most likely that the confusion arises out of a conflict of principles between those which apply to class and those which apply to sex. According to the principles of

⁵⁷Bracton 2, p. 251.

⁵⁸Bracton 2, p. 251.

⁵⁹W.J. Whittaker (ed.), *The Mirror of Justices*, Selden Society 7 (1893), p. 160. Maitland in his introduction makes it clear that this book, which survives only in one manuscript, was not an authoritative work in the manner of the treatises of *Glanvill* and Bracton.

⁶⁰*Year Books* 2, p. 162.

⁶¹Jennifer Ward (ed. and trans.), *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry 1066-1500* (Manchester, 1995), p. 71.

⁶²Norman Davis (ed.), *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1971-6), vol. 1, p. 388.

class and the standard set by the law on majority for males, women must come of age at twenty-one. But from the point of view of their sex, it seems to have been more *practical* to sometimes bring the age down to fourteen or fifteen. This was motivated not necessarily by a sense that young women reached a degree of maturity which enabled them to take up their inheritances at a much younger age than their brothers, but rather by quite separate financial considerations. It is my contention that this difference in the ages of majority between men and women in chivalry is connected with the institution of wardship. This will be discussed further in the next section.

Of the other forms of secular law, both customary and borough law are more variable than common in their statements on age of majority. Manorial custom regarding age of majority probably varied from manor to manor. Zvi Razi finds that males in Halesowen could hold land from the age of twenty, but does not state whether there was a separate age of majority for girls⁶³. Bennett states that few manor courts specified the ages at which girls and boys reached legal maturity, and bases her own interpretation partly on the laws concerning entry to tithing, which occurred for boys at the age of twelve (see below)⁶⁴. The age at which one might legally inherit land, however, was not necessarily the same as that at which one could be held criminally responsible. The age which manorial customs specified as the age of majority for girls remains quite unclear.

Borough customs on full age are more explicit, and vary far more than those of common law. The custom of Shrewsbury in 1339-40, like the common law for the sons and daughters of burgesses, found a boy to be of age at fifteen, when he could measure cloth and tell a good penny from a bad. Then he could give and alienate his land by his deed⁶⁵. In Torksey an heir may come out of wardship at fourteen *or* when he could count *5s. 4d.*, and then could give, bequeath, sell, demise or alienate his tenements freely.⁶⁶ Boys in Wycombe, according to a custom from 1275, held such powers at the tender age of twelve⁶⁷. But boys in Godmanchester in 1324 had to wait until they were twenty, and their

⁶³Zvi Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish: Economy, Society and Demography in Halesowen 1270-1400* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 61.

⁶⁴Bennett, *Women...Countryside*, pp. 67-8.

⁶⁵Mary Bateson (ed.), *Borough Customs*, 2 vols., Selden Society 18 and 21 (1904, 1906), vol. 2, pp. 158-9.

⁶⁶Bateson (ed.), *Borough Customs 2*, pp. 159-60.

⁶⁷Bateson (ed.), *Borough Customs 2*, p. 158.

sisters until they were sixteen, while boys in Exeter in 1342 could demise tenements only upon reaching twenty-one, though in 1363 the custom held that they could make testaments of their lands while only sixteen⁶⁸. One pattern that emerges is the generally more youthful age of majority for girls. Bateson notes some examples of girls considered to be of full age at twelve when for their brothers it was fourteen, and at sixteen when the boys had to wait until they reached twenty-one⁶⁹. Thus in 1435 one Katherine Payn appeared before the Southampton court and declared herself to be fifteen years and more⁷⁰. This would appear to be common pattern in different forms of medieval law, and has already been noted in regard to canon law

Leaving behind the question of what the age of majority might have consisted in terms of years, we must examine what it meant in terms of rights and liabilities. Infants (the usual legal term for anyone under age) had limited property rights. They could inherit and own property, but as we have seen the common law principle was that they should not have dominion or control over that property until of full age. Single under age women had similar property rights to men, though a son would always be preferred to a daughter in inheritance, and furthermore any sisters who were heiresses would have to share an inheritance in parcentage⁷¹.

That a woman under age could own but not control property is illustrated by a case from the court of king's bench in 1362. One Thomas Darell claimed he had been unlawfully disseised of tenements formerly demised to him by one Joan. Joan's defence was that she was under age at the time she had demised the tenements to him. The court ruled in Joan's favour, and Thomas was amerced for his false claim⁷². Joan's status as an infant had made the leasing of her property disallowable, and ironically worked in her favour. Similarly, in a case from the court of common pleas in 1310, a woman attempted to retrieve tenements she had previously quitclaimed on the grounds that she had been under age at the time of

⁶⁸Bateson (ed.), *Borough Customs* 2, p. 158.

⁶⁹Bateson (ed.), *Borough Customs* 2, p.160, n. 3.

⁷⁰Goldberg (ed. and trans.), *Women in England*, p. 237.

⁷¹See *Year Books* 14, pp. 9-20 for a case under common law involving a dispute over property between two sisters. One of them is under age and, though her position in relation to points of court procedure is debated because of her age, her entitlement to freehold tenancy is not questioned.

⁷²G.O. Sayles (ed.), *Select Cases in the Court of King's Bench under Edward III*, vol. 6, Selden Society 82 (1965), pp. 130-131.

making the quitclaim, rendering it invalid⁷³. And in 1317 a married woman was excused from answering a writ in which the demandant made a claim on her tenements, until she reached full age⁷⁴.

It appears that the reasoning behind such limitations on the powers of the infant was concerned about the intellectual capacity of the infant. In 1311 one Maud Hesbath brought a writ against Robert Hesbath, claiming to be heir to certain tenements through her grandfather. Robert answered that the grandfather had previously surrendered the property to him in the form of a fine. Maud's counsel answered that she was "'within age and knoweth not how, nor is competent, to establish her title against the fine'"⁷⁵. In other words, she was deemed legally competent to hold property, but not intellectually capable of defending her tenancy in court. Legal rhetoric could turn the incapacity of the infant to the infant's advantage.

I have rather less evidence from common law concerning the age of criminal and civil responsibility. Pollock and Maitland claim that infants might sue or be sued, and appear in court either to make a complaint or defend themselves⁷⁶, and Holdsworth claims they were liable if guilty of dispossessing another, or of committing waste or trespass, of not paying rent or performing the services due of their land⁷⁷. He also claims that in civil actions infants were apparently as liable as anyone else and were required to pay damages, thus assuming that common law principle is to protect the injured party⁷⁸. Yet the practice of law does not seem to be this clear-cut. In 1313 at the Eyre of Kent a woman was excused from paying a debt at least while she remained under age, as it was claimed that in the custom of Gavelkind liability to answer claim for debt did not attach until the age of twenty-one⁷⁹ (here at least the age of majority for women seems to have been twenty-one). In a case from court of common pleas in 1319 the defendant pleaded that he was under age

⁷³*Year Books* 2, pp. 189-192.

⁷⁴*Year Books* 22, pp. 45-47.

⁷⁵*Year Books* 11, pp. 14-17.

⁷⁶Pollock and Maitland 2, pp. 440-443.

⁷⁷Holdsworth 3, p. 516.

⁷⁸Holdsworth 3, p. 375.

⁷⁹*Year Books* 7, p. 29.

when his debt was incurred⁸⁰. Again, the legal notion of infant incapacity or lack of responsibility could be invoked by lawyers for the defence to protect their under age clients.

The age of criminal responsibility seems no more clear-cut. While it seems to have been generally agreed that an infant under the age of seven, though she or he be convicted of a felony, could not be judged or punished "because he knoweth not of good and evil"⁸¹, judgement on a felony committed by one over that age hinged on whether the infant could be said to be *doli capax*, capable of trickery⁸². So in a case from the Eyre of Kent in 1313-14 it is mentioned that a boy of eleven was once found guilty of stealing certain chattels and killing a child. The fact that after killing the child he also hid the body was taken as evidence of his "heinous malice"⁸³. In 1319 an "infant within age" was accused and found guilty of breaking into a house, and it was "awarded that he be hanged despite his nonage"⁸⁴. Nonage in this instance was probably fourteen, as, according to Holdsworth, by the age of fourteen he would be fully *doli capax*, a state which girls presumably reached at twelve. Thus the ages between seven and twelve or fourteen represent a period in which the judge might use his own discretion in assessing the criminal capacity of the accused.

The complexity regarding age does not end there, however, as the tithing or frankpledge system (administered by the tourn, but held in the same court as hearings of customary law)⁸⁵ held that at the age of twelve a boy became to all intents subject to criminal law, as it was at that age that he had to join a tithing or frankpledge, taking an oath that he would not be a thief or a party to thieving⁸⁶. His fellow tithingmen would then be responsible for bringing him to justice for any felony. By the age of twelve a boy might be "outlawed" because he was a member of a tithing and thus "in law". However any

⁸⁰*Year Books* 24, p. 23.

⁸¹*Year Books* 5, p. 109.

⁸²Holdsworth 3, pp. 372, 511.

⁸³*Year Books* 5, pp. 148-9. The parallels between this and the 1993 trial and conviction of eleven year old Robert Thompson and John Venables for the murder of two year old James Bulger seem striking. In both instances, it was argued that the boys' apparent understanding that the act was morally wrong indicated that a murder trial would be appropriate.

⁸⁴*Year Books* 25, p. 123.

⁸⁵See Pollock and Maitland 1, pp. 531-2, 580-2.

⁸⁶Bracton 2, p. 351.

woman could not be "outlawed" because, as she could not be a member of a tithing, she was never "in law"⁸⁷.

In summary, how do common law and borough custom construct the legal identity of the young woman? The fixing of ages of majority is fundamental in legal distinctions between the female "infant" - who is in some respects restricted in her access to legal process - and the female of "full age". In general she comes of age at around fourteen or fifteen. However, in practice it is possible that sometimes the meaningful distinction lies not so much between the ages of minority and majority, but between the unmarried and the married woman.

The legal positions and identities of *femmes soles* and *femmes couvertes* differed substantially, though it would be incorrect to claim that married women were completely legally "covered" by their husbands. It is not my intention to describe the laws of husband and wife in all their complexity here⁸⁸. Put briefly and simply, in theory, though not necessarily in practice, the husband took possession of any property of the wife, or that which she brought to the marriage as a dowry, and for the term of the marriage (or for his life if an heir were born) he could do as he pleased with the estate, without her consent, apart from alienating it for longer than his period of possession (the marriage or his life, as the case may be). For if he predeceased his wife that property, or its equivalent value, was to be returned to her, along with one third of his estate as dower. However, it was sometimes arranged that the married couple held such property in jointure, or in the "right of the wife", and any actions concerning the joint property had to be brought by or against both husband and wife. It seems that borough customs in general concurred with these common-legal principles⁸⁹. On marrying, a woman also gave up possession of any chattels to her husband, with the likely exception of her "paraphernalia" (dress and personal

⁸⁷Bracton 2, p. 353. This did not excuse a woman from being brought to justice, however, as Bracton states that if she takes flight for a felony she would be regarded as abandoned, and thus no one could claim or protect her, that is, she would be effectively outlawed, pp. 353-4.

⁸⁸Useful summaries are found in Pollock and Maitland 2, pp. 399-436; Charles Donahue, Jr., "What Causes Fundamental Legal Ideas? Marital Property in England and France in the Thirteenth Century" in *Michigan Law Review* 78 (1979), 59-88; and Caroline M. Barron, "The 'Golden Age' of Women in Medieval London" in *Reading Medieval Studies* 15 (1989), 35-58, which compares common law generally with the position of married women in London in particular. See also Ruth Kittel, "Women under the Law in Medieval England, 1066-1485" in Barbara Kaner (ed.), *The Women of England from Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present. Interpretative Bibliographical Essays* (London, 1980), and Janet Senderowitz Loengard, "Legal History and the Medieval Englishwoman" Revisted: Some New Directions" in Joel T. Rosenthal (ed.), *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History* (Athens, Georgia, 1990).

⁸⁹Bateson (ed.), *Borough Customs* 2, pp. 102-108.

adornments - originally hair ornaments). Liability for her debts was, in theory, passed on to the husband, and she could not make a contract on her own behalf. Common law sources allow married women very limited testamentary capacity⁹⁰, but laws regarding wills and testaments were immensely complicated by the jurisdiction of both common and canon law over these matters⁹¹. Canon law was more inclined than common to insist on married women's rights to make testaments.

Legal theory on the non-identity of the married woman was sometimes, but not always, dominant in practice. In a case from the court of King's Bench in 1363, a married woman who was charged along with her husband for harbouring felons was excused from answering the charge, following the defence made by her mainpernor that she had been "a married woman with the aforesaid Richard as her husband, and she still is, and she was completely subject to his authority and could gainsay him in nothing"⁹². However, evidence against a blanket notion of the legal unity of husband and wife is provided by several cases which reveal that marriage did not always extinguish the woman as an individual in the eyes of the law. The issue of whether a husband is liable for debts incurred by his wife during their marriage is played out in a case from 1312-13, where the defendant's wife has died and he is being sued for a debt arising from a contract made by his wife during her coverture. The plaintiff argues that the deed of the wife is the deed of the husband, "for they are as one person", and he is therefore answerable for her contract. The defence argues the contrary, that "the husband represents (only) his own person", that "no contract that the wife made while she was covert could place a charge upon the husband", and "the husband and his wife are different persons". It is concluded that he need only pay the debt if he had profited from the loan⁹³. Another such case finds the husband not liable to a debt incurred by his wife without his knowledge during her coverture. She seems not to be liable either⁹⁴. Such legal arguments seem designed to protect the husband, who in such cases of debt could suffer under an inflexible principle of marital unity.

However, such cases represent a defeat of legal principles, rather than the legal

⁹⁰*Glanvill*, p. 60, *Bracton* 2, p. 178.

⁹¹See Barron, "Golden Age", p. 37.

⁹²*King's Bench* 6, p. 133.

⁹³*Year Books* 13, pp. 153-156.

⁹⁴*Year Books* 6, p. 48.

principles themselves. Where English laws did formally recognize the legal identity of the married woman was in borough customs, where women merchants and traders could claim the legal status of *femmes soles*⁹⁵. The customs state that a woman merchant or trader must sue or answer for herself in any dealing touching her trade. Thus she is responsible for paying or collecting her own debts, for making or breaching covenant or contract, and for any rents due for her shop. Thus for business purposes she is to all intents and purposes single. This tolerance of women trading seems designed ultimately to protect the husband.

Taking marriage as a point of transition - here from maidenhood to wifehood - suggests a rather different set of abilities and responsibilities before and after the transition. The legal theory of the difference between the woman *infra aetatem* and the woman of full age focuses on the inabilities and lack of responsibilities of the former. The legal theory of the difference between the *femme sole* and the *femme couverte*, however, focuses on the abilities of the former and inabilities of the latter⁹⁶. The categories do not fit neatly together. This lack of fit suggests the existence of a phase between the inabilities of childhood and the *couverture* of the latter. This phase is given no legal name, and varied considerably in length and characteristics from one woman to another, and from one social group to another. It has no stable identity, and is indeed invisible in certain forms of law. Yet its invisibility in such discourses does not prove its non-existence. The gap between the laws concerning the woman *infra aetatem* and the *femme couverte* indicates a life cycle stage for women characterised by relative ability and autonomy under the law. This is the phase of maidenhood. The material to be dealt with in the latter three chapters of this thesis suggests that this transitional phase indeed found expression in late medieval English culture, and may be found not only in gaps between certain discourses but written boldly in others.

⁹⁵See John Carpenter and Richard Whittington (eds.), *Liber Albus: The White Book of the City of London*, trans. Henry Thomas Riley (London, 1861), pp. 181-2, and Bateson (ed.), *Borough Customs* 1, pp. 227-8; Barron, "Golden Age", pp. 37, 39-40. A woman trading would not automatically be regarded as a *femme sole* however, as is indicated in an entry concerning a debt from the Norwich customs of 1340, which states that a husband is liable for the debts of his wife where she has taken goods without pledge, and where the husband and wife are known to get along well: Bateson, *Borough Customs* 1, pp. 227-8.

⁹⁶The difference between the abilities and activities of peasant maidens and married women has been explored by Bennett, *Women...Countryside*, chs. 4 and 5.

Discursive Readings

The legal and other material dealt with so far has been read in a straightforward fashion, taking the statements on age of consent, majority and responsibility within the different forms of law at face value. It has been considered useful to offer this straightforward reading initially as a way of providing an overview to English late medieval concepts of the turning points from childhood to adulthood. It is hoped that something of the instability of this transition is apparent from the uncertainties and contradictions inherent in the legal texts and procedures. The purpose of this exercise has been to indicate that although there is no clearly defined space for maidenhood as a stage in women's life cycle within medieval law, the law is not so coherent or clear-cut as to preclude the idea of such a space. The ages from seven to twenty-one represent a cloudy, ill-defined period in the life cycle of both girls and boys according to different forms of law. The idea that there is a gap between the abilities of the young woman of full age and the inabilities of wifehood for women under the common law has also been offered as evidence that, even within such apparently intransigent material as legal texts, there is some indication of a notion of a life cycle phase intervening between childhood and adulthood for women. This section will seek further to undermine the apparent stability of the legal texts by reading them as discursive products, and thus recognising that there is more going on within this material than simple statements about what constitutes the change from legal childhood to legal adulthood.

A reading of any text as the product of a particular discourse asserts that no textual expression has a single, transparent meaning, but rather that it represents the interests, needs, desires and agendas of a particular group. That is, a theory of discourse not only asserts that all textual expressions must be read in context, but that power relations govern what is said and how it is said. Moreover, a Foucauldian theory of discourse asserts that subjectivity does not exist independently, but is constructed by the complex of discourses by which it is surrounded. Human beings shape discourse, but they are also shaped by it⁹⁷.

Another way of putting this is to cite Laura Nader who, in her essay on the

⁹⁷This formulation should be seen as my own, rather than a necessarily canonical definition. All definitions of discourse differ slightly in their emphases. My emphases, throughout this thesis, will fall on the first two aspects of the definition - location and power - with less (but some) emphasis on the third - construction of subjectivity. A useful introduction is Diane Macdonell, *Theories of Discourse: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1986). Many of Michel Foucault's works deal with discourse, but see especially *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. *An Introduction* (Harmondsworth, 1979). I deal with discourses primarily in a linguistic sense, but it should be noted that movement, dress, behaviour, spatial relationships and so on may also be seen as discursive.

ethnographic approach to law, usefully sums up the necessity to read legal sources within their social context, and thus to see what functions the law may be serving, alongside the professed ones of maintenance of order and establishment of norms⁹⁸. She writes that an important question to ask is "what are the manifest and latent jobs of the law and how are they related to the social structure?"⁹⁹

First, to look at canon law. The manifest job of the law on age of consent is to prevent marriage from taking place between parties who do not have the full capacity to consent. But what are the latent jobs? And how do they relate to social structure? Such questions are not easily answered, and rather than suggest any firm solutions I shall simply gesture at some possibilities here. The broad question regarding the origins of the notion of an age of consent contains two smaller questions: firstly, what were the motivations guiding the setting of an age of consent; and secondly, why were the ages of twelve for girls and fourteen for boys singled out?

The first question may be addressed, but only somewhat speculatively, by reference to the theories of Jack Goody. Goody's aim was to find a social and economic, rather than a purely philosophical, motivation behind canon-legal principles on marriage, and was particularly interested in the perplexingly strict rules regarding consanguinity or affinity as impediments to marriage¹⁰⁰. He argued that the clerical rationale was to enforce exogamy in order to prevent powerful and wealthy families from building up webs of interrelations through marriage, webs which enabled the accumulation of vast blocs of property within the hands of a few elite families. Such accumulations threatened existing clerical claims to property, as well as restricting the church's ability to extend its holdings. Canon law reforms on the making of valid marriages thus helped to restrict secular control of property through ties of marriage.

But how did the law on minimum age fit within this scheme? Building on Goody's hypothesis, it must be seen within the context of the developing insistence on consent as the only necessary criterion for a valid marriage. This development helped take control over marriage out of the hands of families - who might have their own interests at heart in

⁹⁸Laura Nader, "The Anthropological Study of Law" in *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965), 3-32.

⁹⁹Nader, "Anthropological Study of Law", p. 23.

¹⁰⁰Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 134-56. For an alternative view, which sees a greater balance between the influence of ecclesiastical and secular motives within marriage reform, see Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray, (London, 1984).

making matches - and putting it, legally at least, in the hands of the parties to be married. Canon law on the necessity of consent to a valid marriage may thus be seen as part of the clerical attempt to break down secular ties of wealth and power. The idea of an "age of consent" as the minimum age at marriage may have been aimed at helping to take control over marriage out of family hands. By linking the age of consent to an idea of the age at puberty, canonists were also appealing to the clerical ideal that marriage and sex must be for procreation alone. Thus, only once the parties had reached an age at which they could find reproduction physically possible could they make a valid marriage¹⁰¹.

One problem with this interpretation is that it ignores the aristocratic interests which canon law on age at marriage may be seen to serve. For while, on the one hand, one could argue that the law forced marriages to be made at a relatively late age, that is, later than childhood, one could equally assert that by making twelve and fourteen the minimum ages at marriage the church in fact aided the interests of members of the social elite who wanted to be able to marry their children off at a relatively *early* age. For, as we have seen, the age of consent was significantly lower than the age of majority or responsibility under most secular legal codes, and within medical discourse twelve represented at best the youngest age at which a girl might achieve puberty. Moreover, if the church were concerned only with its own economic interests, then why did the canon law contain loopholes through which aristocratic families could jump? The loophole which allowed marriages to be made in the cradle, if they were *pro bono pacis*, seems designed to play into the hands of those who looked on marriage as a means to control political ends¹⁰².

The other loopholes discussed, such as allowing girls under twelve to make valid marriages if they could be shown to possess *malitia* or *prudencia*, or to be *proxima pubertati*¹⁰³, may be linked to the cultural context in which canon law on marriage was formulated. It may be significant that much of the canon law on marriage was written in southern Europe, and may have thus been influenced by the southern European marriage pattern which saw girls married at a younger age than girls in north-western Europe (see below). Gratian probably lived and taught in Bologna, Huguccio was the bishop of Ferrara,

¹⁰¹Brundage, *Law Sex and Christian Society*, pp. 182-3. See St Augustine, "The Good of Marriage" in Charles T. Wilcox et al. (trans.), *Treatises on Marriage and other Subjects* (Washington, 1955), pp. 9-12.

¹⁰²For examples of papal dispensations to marry outside canon legal restrictions, including the impediment *infra annos nobiles*, see Joel T. Rosenthal, "Aristocratic Marriage and the English Peerage, 1350-1500: Social, Institutional and Personal Bond" in *Journal of Medieval History* 10 (1984), 181-94.

¹⁰³See *Dec. Greg. IX.*, Lib. IV. Tit. II. Caps. VI, IX, XIV.

and Raymond of Peñafort, producer of the *Decretales Gregorii IX*, was Catalan¹⁰⁴. The Bologna law school was the earliest, and perhaps the most influential, of the major law schools¹⁰⁵. Peter Biller's comparative work on pastoral manuals in late medieval England and Italy has revealed an Italian interest in the possibility of marriage for girls still six months under canonical age, while the English authors of his study showed no interest in this question¹⁰⁶. The impulse driving the passages defining ways to circumvent the rulings on the age of consent in years may have come out of a cultural context in which there was a heightened interest in having girls married off as early as possible for dynastic purposes, and thus aristocratic pressures may have impinged upon the writing of canon law.

Still, the question of why the ages of twelve and fourteen were chosen to represent the moment at which girls and boys reached both psychological and physiological maturity remains unanswered. As noted, other discourses offer later ages for the age of female puberty, while the traditions concerning ages at reception of first eucharist, first penance and confirmation and the common and borough law customs on the ages of majority and responsibility offer varying opinions on the age at which children move from childish to adult moral and intellectual understanding. Canon law's appeal to the authority of Roman law is central here¹⁰⁷. Whether or not well-off Roman girls reached puberty at twelve is something which we do not know. But the Roman precedent which set this as girls' minimum age at marriage gained sufficient textual authority to make it a "fact" of female development by the high middle ages. Thus, in Foucauldian terms, discourse came to create subjectivity. The idea that girls reached psychological and physiological maturity at twelve, and boys at fourteen, was an item of "knowledge" within an authoritative textual tradition. This was enough to make it a "reality" within the law, and within the lives of medieval people. The discourse which said that twelve and fourteen were the ages of puberty and consent meant that, under the law, girls and boys reached puberty and consent at these ages. As reaching "puberty" or "consent" in the law had at least as many "real" ramifications for these medieval girls and boys as their own biologies and psychologies did,

¹⁰⁴Brundage, *Law Sex and Christian Society*, pp. 229, 257, 327.

¹⁰⁵Brundage, *Law Sex and Christian Society*, pp. 256-60. The other schools were in Paris, England and Normandy (the "Anglo-Norman" school) and the Rhineland.

¹⁰⁶P.P.A. Biller, "Marriage Patterns and Women's Lives: A Sketch of Pastoral Geography" in Goldberg (ed.), *Women is a Worthy Wight*, pp. 67-8.

¹⁰⁷On the Roman law revival of the twelfth century see Brundage, *Law Sex and Christian Society*, pp. 177-9.

then legal discourse may be said to have constructed their subjectivities, or their identities, with respect to development towards adulthood.

The common law on age at majority may also be read for its "manifest" and "latent" jobs. Firstly, the passages from *Glanvill* and Bracton must be read in context. It is within discussions of inheritance, and the necessity for the under age heir to be in wardship, that these authors set down the laws on full age¹⁰⁸. Sue Sheridan Walker has noted how proofs of age by feudal heirs were a common part of procedure in property claims by those coming out of wardship¹⁰⁹. Age is a concern partly for the reasons given by the treatises (that is, the manifest jobs), which are the need for the heir to be mentally and physically capable of taking on the tasks and responsibilities of running an estate, household or business. But the latent jobs are guided by interests which have less to do with the young person coming out of wardship, and more related to the financial interests of the guardian.

Bracton says that heirs within age "must of necessity be under the tutelage and care of others since they are unable to govern themselves"¹¹⁰. Such protection of the heir and her or his inheritance may have been one function of wardship, but it must not be forgotten that wardship was also an investment, and could be very profitable. The guardian of a feudal heir (and here I deal only with wards in chivalry) held rights in the person, marriage and land of the heir¹¹¹. Rents and profits from the land were due to the guardian, who could also make a significant sum through selling the marriage of the ward, and to whom damages were payable in cases of ravishment of ward¹¹². I suspect that the enforcement of the laws on ages of majority was designed to protect and regulate the benefits of wardship. The guardian would know what the term of his or her investment would be, and any legal proceedings surrounding the heir's exit from wardship and claim of inheritance would be greatly simplified.

The substantial difference between the ages of majority for males and females may

¹⁰⁸*Glanvill*, pp. 82-5, Bracton 2, pp. 250-254.

¹⁰⁹Sue Sheridan Walker, "Proof of Age of Feudal Heirs in Medieval England" in *Mediaeval Studies* 35 (1973), 306-323.

¹¹⁰Bracton 2, p.250.

¹¹¹On wardship see Scott Waugh, *The Lordship of England: Royal Wardships and Marriages in English Society and Politics, 1217-1327* (Princeton, 1988); Sue Sheridan Walker, "Widow and Ward: The Feudal Law of Child Custody in Medieval England" in Susan Mosher Stuard (ed.), *Women in Medieval Society* (Philadelphia, 1976); Pollock and Maitland 1, pp. 318-22.

¹¹²*Glanvill*, pp. 82-5; Bracton 2, pp. 252-4.

also be accounted for in terms of benefit to the guardian. Where male feudal heirs inherited the whole estate, female heirs would have to share the property with their sisters, if they had any, in a system known as parcenage¹¹³. This may have made the marrying-off of female wards more profitable than the rents and services of their land. The value of a female ward's marriage is clear from passages in the treatises, which assert that a female ward must remain in wardship until she marries with the consent of her lord, even if she passes the age of majority. This is ostensibly to ensure that she does not marry a man who may be her guardian's enemy, but surely also to ensure that he does not lose out financially¹¹⁴. If these suggestions are true, then they may account for the lower age of women's majority. The sooner the guardian could reap the financial reward of her marriage, the better. Thus Joan, daughter and heiress of William de Welles, became a ward of the Crown on the death of her father and this wardship was granted to Guy de Brian. In 1351 proofs that she was fifteen years old were offered, and when she married Henry de Coggeshale her guardian received £400 from the groom's father¹¹⁵.

The borough courts' interest in ages of majority does not obviously perform any such latent jobs. The ages stated vary so greatly from one borough to another that it would be necessary to investigate the individual circumstances of each borough in order to determine whether the specific ages of majority were performing jobs apart from those stated. In those boroughs such as Shrewsbury where boys' age of majority was in the mid teens, it is possible that the customs performed nothing more than that which they claimed to do; that is, to ensure that young people taking on the responsibilities of business possessed the necessary mental capacity for handling money and using weights and measures, thus protecting the interests of anyone who had business dealings with a young person. The jobs performed by the custom where the male age of majority was at one of the extremes, at twelve or at twenty-one, cannot be easily made out, though in the latter considerations of wardship profits may have had an influence. This may also help to account for the regularly lower ages of majority for girls than boys¹¹⁶.

¹¹³*Glanvill*, pp. 95-7; Pollock and Maitland 2, pp. 306-7.

¹¹⁴*Glanvill*, p. 85 and Bracton 2, pp. 252-257.

¹¹⁵Ward (ed. and trans.), *Women...Nobility and Gentry*, pp. 25-6, p. 25, n.29.

¹¹⁶In towns wardship usually fell to a relative who could not inherit the property concerned, though in London it fell to the city in the first instance. See Pollock and Maitland 1, p. 321; *Liber Albus*, p. 96; Elaine Clark, "City Orphans and Custody Laws in Medieval England" in *American Journal of Legal History* 34 (1990), 168-87.

The purpose of this section has been to show that legal texts, which were ostensibly interested in fixing the turning points from childhood to adulthood on the grounds of psychological and physiological developments, were often guided by numerous other interests and agendas which in themselves had little to do with issues of life cycle. Moreover, I hope to have indicated that the ages which the legal codes set as the transition point to adulthood were discursive rather than "real" (and the instability of the different laws on this topic should indicate this), but also that the discourse of law to some extent created its own reality, where young women of twelve, fifteen or twenty-one could be treated as adults under the law, regardless of their individual circumstances. In general, my purpose so far has been to show that while the legal codes of late medieval England did not make a space for a transitional period of maidenhood in the life cycle of women, neither should those codes be read as so stable and coherent as to preclude the possibility of that space. Moreover, the gap which was glimpsed between the inabilities of the female child and the married woman has already been suggested as a gap in the legal discourse which may be filled with the period of maidenhood. This survey has also suggested twelve as the lowest entry point to maidenhood for girls, while also acknowledging that there was no single, stable concept of an entry point, but rather a range based upon different interests. The rest of this chapter will look at ages at marriage and motherhood, which in some cases at least might be held to mark the end point of maidenhood.

Ages at Marriage and Motherhood: The End of Maidenhood?

In 1447 Sir Thomas Clifford married his six year old daughter, Elizabeth, to Robert Plumpton, the son and heir of Sir William Plumpton. The girl was so young that one John Garthe "bare her in his armes" to the chapel. The two had been married three years, without consummating the match, when Robert died, and so in 1453 Elizabeth, at the age of twelve, was married to the second son, William Plumpton. On this occasion

the seid Sir William promised the seid Lord Clifford that they shuld not ligge togedder till she came to the age of xvi yeres. And when she came to xviii yeres, she had Margarete, now lady Roucliffe¹¹⁷.

According to canon law, there was nothing to prevent the marriage of Elizabeth and William from being consummated. By the age of twelve she was, in law, a grown woman

¹¹⁷Quoted from the Clifford Papers, account written in 1503-4, in Thomas Stapleton (ed.), *Plumpton Correspondence*, Camden Society, o.s. 4 (1839), p. lxiv.

both physically and psychologically. So why should Sir William have felt the need to assure Elizabeth's father that the marriage would not be consummated before she reached sixteen?

Evidence regarding ages at marriage and motherhood for late medieval Englishwomen indicates that canon legal theory on women's marriageable age was just that - theory - and that social beliefs and practice occupied a rather different notion of the transition to adulthood for women. While marriages at very young ages could and sometimes did take place, particularly for women of high social status, it would be a mistake to see marriage below or around the age of puberty as a norm, even for young noblewomen. The space that opens up between the legal (twelve) or the real (probably between thirteen and fifteen) ages of puberty, and the ages at either marriage, consummation or motherhood, is the stage which I label maidenhood, and represents a distinct phase in the life cycle of late medieval Englishwomen.

The notion that in the middle ages girls were usually married at very young ages is becoming increasingly unpopular. The work of Richard Smith and Jeremy Goldberg has refuted the argument, introduced by John Hajnal and substantiated by Zvi Razi, that late marriage between partners of similar ages was a feature of the early modern period in England, contrasting with the medieval regime of early marriage for women¹¹⁸. However even Razi's "early" age at marriage for girls in Halesowen hardly indicates child marriage, as a large proportion of his sample married between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two¹¹⁹. Smith has argued that the "medieval" marriage regime postulated by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber for Tuscany, of girls in their late teens marrying men around ten years older than themselves, should be seen as Mediterranean rather than medieval, and in making this claim initiated the trend in medieval family history which notes strong differences between north-western and southern European practices¹²⁰. Goldberg has

¹¹⁸John Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective" in D.V. Glass and D.E.V. Eversley (eds.), *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (London, 1965); Razi, *Life Marriage and Death*, pp. 60-3.

¹¹⁹Razi, *Life Marriage and Death*, p. 63.

¹²⁰David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven, Conn., 1985), pp. 87, 210-11, 215; David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 103-11; R.M. Smith, "The People of Tuscany and their Families in the Fifteenth Century: Medieval or Mediterranean?" in *Journal of Family History* 6 (1981), 107-28; idem, "Some Reflections on the Evidence for the Origins of the 'European Marriage Pattern' in England" in C.C. Harris (ed.), *The Sociology of the Family: New Directions for Britain* (Sociological Review Monograph, 28; Keele, 1979); idem, "Geographical Diversity in the Resort to Marriage in Late Medieval Europe: Work, Reputation,

expanded upon Smith's findings based on Poll Tax records, and, using the rich resources of the depositions in the cause papers of the York consistory court, argues that urban girls tended to marry in their early to mid twenties, while rural girls married in their late teens to early twenties, and both married men close to them in age¹²¹. Perhaps even more useful than the data on marriage age, where known, is Goldberg's argument that service was, in England, an institution occupied primarily by young unmarried men and women, who left home to enter positions of service during their teens and into their twenties. The existence of this institution suggests strongly that, among the social groups dealt with by Goldberg at least, that there was a life cycle stage intervening between childhood and fully-fledged adulthood, both for men and women.

The question of whether such a life cycle stage existed for women of the gentry and aristocracy is, however, rather more open to question. Jennifer Ward comments that children of the nobility were usually married in their teens, and sometimes well below canonical age¹²². Yet anecdotal evidence concerning early marriage age among the social elite may be misleading, for a number of reasons. We are more likely to know about the marriages of heiresses than other girls, and heiresses are more likely than other girls to have been married off very young. Thus we know that Margaret Plumpton, daughter of Elizabeth Plumpton née Clifford whose youthful marriages have already been mentioned, was married off in 1463 at the age of four by her grandfather, Sir William Plumpton, who (falsely) asserted that Margaret and her sister Elizabeth were his heirs¹²³. Moreover, we are more likely to know about marriages that come into dispute than marriages which do not, and under age marriage is one of the concerns which could result in such disputes. Thus we know that Alice de Rouclif was married at ten or eleven¹²⁴. We are also more likely to know about the age at girls' marriage when their parents died while they (the children) were still in childhood. This is partly because the daughters would then pass into wardship - which involved legal documentation, and early marriage for the financial benefit of the

and Unmarried Females in the Household Formation Systems of Northern and Southern Europe" in Goldberg (ed.), *Woman is a Worthy Wight*.

¹²¹Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, esp. pp. 225-232. See also idem "Marriage, Migration, and Servanthood".

¹²²Jennifer C. Ward, *English Noblewomen of the Later Middle Ages*, (Harlow, 1992), p. 13.

¹²³PC, p. 8 (1463).

¹²⁴B.I.H.R. CP. E 89.

guardian - and partly because the age at which their parents would like them to marry or enter a convent is often specified in the will. Thus when Beatrix Lady Greystoke made her will in 1505, she made provision for her thirteen year old son to go to Cambridge and on to the Inns of Court at eighteen, and for her six year old son Robert to be sent to grammar school once he reached the age of twelve. For her two daughters she provided that

when my doughter Elizabeth shall com to th'age of xij yeres, and she be then disposed to be a nonne, that then my executors shall paie or cause to be paid unto the said Master of Watton xx li. ... If any convenient mariege for my doughter Jane shall hap to be purvid afor she be of th'age of xiiij or after, then myn executors shall cast and evynly rate and devide all such goodes as then shal be in ther possessions...amonges my said childre...If she be nott maried afor she come to xiiij, then Thomas Rokby, or Anne, to have vij marc yerely for vij yeres for her exhibicon and finding. If Elizabeth my doughter will nott agre to entre into religion at th'age of xij yeres, then my executors, for ij yeres folowing, shall pay to the said Thomas Rokby, or Anne, to and for her exhibicon, vij marc [the money which would have been her monastic dowry should then go towards securing her a marriage]¹²⁵.

It seems likely that in such cases parents were most concerned to ensure that the futures of children of both sexes were arranged in the case of death, and for daughters this generally meant that their future lives as wives or nuns should be settled as quickly as possible. It does not necessarily follow from this that daughters who were not heiresses, and whose parents were alive and well, would have been married off in childhood or soon after puberty.

Indeed, Thomas Hollingsworth's demographic study of the English peerage suggests that, even within this most exalted social group, child or pubescent brides were hardly the norm¹²⁶. Although he finds the mean age at marriage of duke's daughters from 1330 to 1479 to have been 17.1 years, this figure does not in fact reveal very much about ages at which marriages were most frequent. The breakdown of his figures indicates that while a significant proportion of daughters had married by the age of fifteen, the rate then slowed considerably, with a number still unmarried by the age of thirty, and thereafter a handful who never married. Moreover, his proportions indicate that more daughters married between

¹²⁵J. Raine (ed.), *Testamenta Eboracensia: A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York* vol. 4, Surtees Society 53 (1868), pp. 237-8. See also Ward (ed. and trans.), *Women...Nobility and Gentry*, p. 34, for the 1383 will of Sir William Berland, who states that his daughters "should be married before the age of fifteen if they want to be married" or else take the veil.

¹²⁶T.H. Hollingsworth, "A Demographic Study of the British Ducal Families" in Glass and Eversley, *Population in History*, pp. 364-5, tables 17 and 18.

the ages of twenty and twenty-five than between fifteen and twenty, thus rendering the mean of 17.1 rather meaningless.

Even within examples of very young marriage by girls of the social elite, it is sometimes evident that early marriage took place purely out of expedience, rather than out of any sense that the early teens or younger were suitable marriage ages for girls. The celebrated example of Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, is a case in point¹²⁷. The wardship of this heiress of John Beaufort, who died in the year following her birth, was a valuable one, and was first granted to William de la Pole who betrothed her to his son when she was just six. Within three years this contract was dissolved and Margaret's wardship transferred to Jasper and Edmund Tudor. She was married to Edmund Tudor in 1455, at the age of twelve, and was pregnant within a few months. Made a widow when six months pregnant, she gave birth to the future Henry VII while still only thirteen years old.

Both the marriage and the pregnancy obviously took place as matters of political convenience for Edmund Tudor, just in time as it turned out. They should not be taken as examples of what was considered appropriate for girls in their early teens in the fifteenth century. Marriage and the begetting of heirs had an importance for the social elite which in some cases enabled the disregarding of other cultural beliefs, such as the nature of young womanhood and of what it should ideally consist. Unease about the young age at which Margaret went through the adult experiences of marriage and childbirth is evident in the words of her sixteenth-century eulogist, who commented on the difficulty of the birth, and that she was evidently not fully physically developed - "not a woman of great stature...she was so much smaller at that stage"¹²⁸. Permanent physical damage, her modern biographers suggest, resulted from the birth, and she had no other children. That her own experiences led to an antipathy to early marriage was suggested later in her life, when she opposed the marriage of one of her granddaughters to James IV of Scotland, fearing James would not wait to consummate it¹²⁹.

Still on the highest rung of the social ladder, John Carmi Parsons' survey of the

¹²⁷See John Fisher, "Mornyng Remembraunce had at the Moneth Mynde of the Noble Prynces Margarete Countesse of Rychemonde and Darbye" in *The English Works of John Fisher* part 1, ed. John E.B. Mayor, E.E.T.S., e.s. 27 (1876), pp. 292-3; Michael K. Jones and Malcolm G. Underwood, *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 35-40.

¹²⁸Oration quoted in J. Lewis, *Life of John Fisher*, 2 vols. (London, 1855), vol. 2, p. 265.

¹²⁹Jones and Underwood, *The King's Mother*, p. 40.

Plantagenets, Mortimers and Hollands from 1150 to 1500 has found evidence of a tendency to delay consummation of marriage where the female party was below fifteen at the time of marriage¹³⁰. Of the seven out of twenty-three girls who did bear children while under fifteen, five of these were king's wives or daughters. Overall, he notes that over half the girls included in his study were not married until fifteen or older (forty-nine out of eighty-seven), and of the remainder, among most of those who bore children there seems to have been a decision to delay consummation until the girl was considered to be of a suitable age.

In these instances, as with that of Elizabeth Clifford cited above, it may have been that the girls concerned were rushed into motherhood as soon as possible after reaching menarche, given that it appears likely that the average age at menarche was between thirteen and fifteen. On the other hand, it is possible that a more sophisticated notion of the appropriate age at first conception was operating, one which held that birth should not take place until a few years after the mother's menarche. A eugenicist ethics, derived from Aristotle's *Politics* and transmitted by Giles of Rome in his hugely popular *De Regimine Principium*, argued that an early marriage age was dangerous, as it might engender imperfect children (and this in turn would harm the state)¹³¹. It was also dangerous to women in that it awakened intemperate sexual urges in them and put them at risk of physical damage from birth at too early an age, and to men in risking enfeeblement through intercourse too early¹³². Perfect ages at marriage, therefore, were eighteen for women and twenty-one for men, said Giles, considerably lowering Aristotle's perfect age for men from thirty-six but retaining the perfect age for women¹³³. Post notes an apparent discrepancy in a late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century gynaecological handbook, which describes the physical and moral dangers of sex for women before the age of fifteen - that is, "the tyme she may conceive" - even though it elsewhere speaks of shedding of "flowers" at twelve

¹³⁰John Carmi Parsons, "Mothers, Daughters, Marriage, Power: Some Plantagenet Evidence, 1150-1500" in idem (ed.), *Medieval Queenship* (Stroud, 1994), pp. 66-7. He examines eighty-seven marriages, of which forty-nine occurred after the girl turned fifteen. Of the remaining thirty-eight, fifteen remained childless. Of the twenty-three out of thirty-eight who married below fifteen and bore children at some stage, sixteen had their first child three or more years after marriage.

¹³¹Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. and trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass, 1932), pp. 617-9. On Giles of Rome and the idea of a eugenicist ethics in the later middle ages see Peter Biller, "Demographic Thought' around 1300 and Dante's Florence" in John C. Barnes and Cormac Ó Cuilleánáin (eds.), *Dante and the Middle Ages: Literary and Historical Essays* (Dublin, 1995), esp. p. 67.

¹³²Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 621; Biller, "Demographic Thought", p. 67.

¹³³Biller, "Demographic Thought", p. 67.

or thirteen¹³⁴. It is therefore possible that considerations other than reaching puberty were important in determining the age at which a maiden was considered physically ready to begin sexual relations.

In moving down the social ladder a rung we find, within letters of the Paston and Stonor collections, instances in which the youth of a prospective bride is held up as a matter for concern. Though the adjective "young" is not infrequently used favourably in regard to eligible women in the Paston letters, and also in the letters of the mercantile Celys¹³⁵, it is apparent that sometimes, in regard to a bride's youth, it was possible to have too much of a good thing. John Paston II (Sir John) wrote to his younger brother John Paston III of a young Mistress Barly, who had evidently received inspection as a prospective bride for the younger John before the latter's betrothal to Margery Brews:

as for thys mater off Mestresse Barly, I holde it butt a bare thyng. I feele weell þat itt passyth nott <...> marke. I syghe hyre fore yowre sake. she is a lytell onys; she maye be a woman heere-afftre, iff she be nott olde nowe: hire person semyth xiiij yere off age, hyre yerys men sey ben full xviiij¹³⁶.

Sir John's dismissive tone is as contemptuous of Mistress Barly's underdeveloped figure as of her slight fortune (see Chapter Four, below, for a discussion of feminine eligibility in the gentry class). The grasping Paston brothers seem little interested in taking pubescent-looking women as brides. Two years later William Paston III wrote to John Paston III concerning a "yong jentylwoman" Margaret Alborow, whose wealth and beauty seemed promising, but not entirely certain, and who was "be all lykelyod xviiij or xix 3ere at þe fertheste"¹³⁷. Her age comes across as the most promising of her attributes.

The letters contained in the Stonor collection from Thomas Betson concerning his young betrothed, Katherine Ryche, step-daughter of his business partner William Stonor, are the most revealing of the unease with which an adult man could face the prospect of

¹³⁴Post, "Ages at Menarche and Menopause", p. 86. The manuscript he cites is Ms Bodley 483, 109a. Note, though, that another version of this text, Ms Additional 12195, edited by Lisa Howarth in "The Practice of Midwifery in Late Medieval England", unpublished MA dissertation, University of York, 1995, includes a very similar passage but indicates that fifteen is both the appropriate age for earliest sexual activity and of menarche, pp. 31-2, 35-6.

¹³⁵See for example *PL* 1, pp. 190, 287, 613, 650; Henry Elliot Malden (ed.), *The Cely Papers 1475-1488*, Camden Society ser. 3, vol. 1 (1900), pp. 59, 102.

¹³⁶*PL* 1, p. 499 (1477).

¹³⁷*PL* 1, pp. 650-1, no. 407.

marrying a young girl¹³⁸. Katherine was twelve or thirteen at the time of their betrothal, and only fifteen at their marriage. Betson never seemed comfortable with the youth of his betrothed:

And yff ye wold be a good etter off your mete allwaye, that ye myght waxe and grow ffast to be a woman, ye shuld make me the gladdest man off the world, be me trouth: ffor whanne I remembre your ffavour and your sadde loffyng delynge to me wardes, ffor south ye make me evene veray glade and joyus in my hart: and on the toþersyde agayn whanne I remembre your yonge youthe. And seeth well that ye be none eteter off youre mete, the which shuld helpe you greatly in waxynge...¹³⁹.

His letter has been called "charming" by Eileen Power and "delightful" by Christine Carpenter¹⁴⁰, as indeed it is on one level, but it can also be read as a peculiarly schizophrenic example of the confusion aroused by such a mis-match of ages. At times it reads as a conventional love letter - "where as ye, ffull womanly and lyke a loffer, remembre me with manyffolde recomendacion in dyverre maners..." - and at others as an address to a child:

I pray you grete well my horsse, and praye hym to gyffe yow iiij yeres to helpe you with all: and I will at my comynge home gyff hym iiij off my yeres and iiij horsse lofes till amendes¹⁴¹.

It was not only Katherine's physical youth which caused Betson concern, it was also her level of spiritual development. Shortly before their wedding he wrote to Sir William Stonor, expressing gratitude for the latter's efforts in seeing to the good upbringing of his step-daughter¹⁴². Without that "she cowd nat be off that disposicion vertuuous and goodly, hir youthe remembred and consederyd". Yet he still harbours some doubts: "I shall whanne I speke with hir tell hir every word, and yff I ffynd the contrarye our vycar here, so God helpe me, shall crye owte upon h[ir] within this x wekes and lesse, and by that tyme I shall be redy in every poy[nt] with Godes grace, and so I wold she were"¹⁴³. Betson's unease

¹³⁸SL & P 2, pp. 6-8, 27-8, 46-8, 53-7.

¹³⁹SL & P 2, p. 7.

¹⁴⁰Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (London, 1924), p. 119; Christine Carpenter, introduction to *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290-1483* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 24.

¹⁴¹SL & P 2, p. 7.

¹⁴²SL & P 2, pp. 56-57.

¹⁴³SL & P 2, p. 7.

even crept into his dreams, as he relates to Katherine's mother:

I dremyd ones she was xxx wynter off age; and whanne I woyke I
wyschyd she had bene but xx: and so by lykelyod I am soner lyke to
have my wysche þan my dreme¹⁴⁴.

That marriage at, soon after, or even before canonical age occurred for some girls of the late medieval English gentry and aristocracy is not in doubt. What this discussion has hoped to show is that such marriages were not as ubiquitous as has sometimes been suggested, that they were not necessarily considered normal, and certainly were often regarded as undesirable. What seems certain is that where such marriages did occur they tell us little about late medieval ideas of maidenhood, and much about class aspirations. This discussion has also turned up yet more instability in the evidence concerning the phases of women's life cycle, and the difficulty in noting clear turning points from one stage to another. If we can mark the entry point of maidenhood as puberty, then we can only suggest a rough point between the ages of twelve and fifteen. Marking the exit point, if marriage, sexual activity or motherhood indicates the end, is even more difficult. Girls in peasant or urban working society may not have married until their mid twenties in some cases. But should maidenhood be considered to last up to this point, especially considering that it was not unheard of for such young women to become sexually active¹⁴⁵? Some aristocratic girls may have been married by twelve, and a very small minority may have even become mothers soon after. Were they never maidens? I suggest that it is best neither to impose a neatness on the evidence where little exists, nor to give up as impossible the idea that young medieval women experienced a life cycle phase between childhood and adulthood. Rather, it seems best to adopt a flexible definition of maidenhood, based more on its dominant themes than its term in years. Maidenhood was the stage in a woman's life between the time when she *could* marry (taking marriage in the full sense), and the time by which she might be expected to have married. It was the age at which a woman was sexually mature, but sexually inactive. She could be considered desirable, but was expected to be chaste. That notions of this life cycle phase for women were not only current in late medieval English culture, but received expression in an enormous variety of forms, will be the subject of the remainder of this thesis.

¹⁴⁴*SL & P 2*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁵Goldberg (ed. and trans.), *Women in England*, introduction, p. 9.

PART TWO: AUTONOMY

INTRODUCTION: IDEAS OF AUTONOMY AND SELFHOOD

How much control were medieval maidens of different social backgrounds able to exercise over their own lives? Such a question seems obvious for inclusion within a feminist analysis of young womanhood in late medieval England. An examination of that question might include discussion of the degree to which young women were able to be financially independent, could move around freely and associate with young men, had access to legal processes and the capacity to act as their own persons in law, or to choose occupations or marriage partners according to their own wishes. The modern feminist movement has stressed the liberation both of the individual female subject and women as a group, based on the idea that women have the right to pursue lives guided by their own choices rather than the impositions of others. Some medieval feminist scholarship has indeed pursued this line of inquiry, either implicitly or explicitly, as modern feminist scholars seek precedents for such interests and motivations among the women of the past¹.

This interest also prompted my own inclusion of the theme of autonomy as one of the motifs to be explored in relation to medieval maidens. But a different approach guides the final analysis of this theme, as it is presented here. The idea that modern women have the right to take control over their own lives is an aspect of a wider modern belief in the autonomous self and the individual as an agent². It is not necessarily appropriate to apply this idea of the self to a medieval context, and thus the idea of the degree of "autonomy" experienced by young medieval Englishwomen will be considered with an alternative notion of selfhood in mind.

One problem relates to evidence. It does not seem reasonable to attempt to judge

¹The work of both Jeremy Goldberg and Judith Bennett may, on the whole, be seen to take the approach of interpreting women's actions according to a notion of a desire for independence or agency. See also many of the essays in Mary Eler and Maryanne Kowaleski (eds.), *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens, Georgia, 1988). As Shannon McSheffrey has recently pointed out, historians of heresy or heterodoxy have often asserted that women were particularly drawn to alternative religious ideologies as these offered women roles and identities which orthodox religion barred to them, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities 1420-1530* (Philadelphia, 1995), pp. 2-3. McSheffrey's own position - that one must consider women's socio-economic status, family position, age, geography and occupation, as well as gender, in considerations of women's identity - is one which I share.

²The notion of the autonomous self has, of course, been challenged within recent philosophical and intellectual tradition, with the rise of the notion of the self constantly constituted by discourse. In relation to feminist politics, this idea of the discursively constructed self has had more impact upon ideas within academe - such as Judith Butler's ideas of the performativity of gender and "biological" sex as a cultural construction - than within popular feminism. See Chapter Four, below.

whether or not maidens were interested in, or felt they were able to achieve, a degree of autonomy, when the available sources which provide us with the words of young women themselves are so few and far between. The letters of Margery Brews (and perhaps those of Alice Crane and Cicely Daune), of Dorothy Plumpton, and Anne and Mary Bassett, and the occasional voice heard filtered through the narratives of court proceedings, are the odd exceptions to this rule³. In general, it is only through the words of authoritative male writers that we gain access to a notion of maidenhood⁴. The limitations of women's literacy in this period, in the sense of writing skills, may be one of the reasons for the paucity of records left even by women of the nobility⁵. However, as numerous documents, particularly letters, by older married women or widows of high status groups exist (and most of these in the hand of scribes rather than autograph), it is perhaps more than lack of writing ability which accounts for the near silence of maidens in the written record. It was perhaps rather their social role and position, and the little importance granted their ability to act as autonomous agents, which kept them out of the written record. Women of low social status, on the other hand shared their general silence with men of their class⁶.

Occasionally an apparently clear voice of defiance sounds through indirect sources, such as the reporting of speech in court records, but how well are we able to understand the mentality prompting that voice? In 1453 Agnes Cosyn, from the village of Eastburn in

³*PL* 1, pp. 662-3; 2, pp. 339, 389-90; *PC* p. 202; Muriel St Clare Byrne (ed.), *The Lisle Letters*, 6 vols. (Chicago, 1981), vol. 3, pp. 142-3, 150, 164-5, 166-7, 174-5. For the voices of young women heard during ecclesiastical court proceedings see the selections from the London ecclesiastical court records in Shannon McSheffrey (ed. and trans.), *Love and Marriage in Late Medieval London* (Kalamazoo, 1995), and for the York consistory court see selections in Goldberg (ed. and trans.), *Women in England*.

⁴Kim M. Phillips, "Medieval Maidenhood: What Old Men Say about Young Girls", in P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (eds.), *Youth in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, forthcoming).

⁵The question of women's literacy and education has been the subject of much recent study. Details concerning women's early education in literacy skills are not a feature of this thesis, as that is a topic more for a study of female childhood than maidenhood. In brief, it appears that while reading skills were important to women of the aristocracy, gentry, merchant class, and perhaps some below these groups, writing skills were less common (though not unknown). Thus, for example, Agnes, Elizabeth, Margaret and Margery Paston's letters are in the hands of scribes, though Margery (née Brews) signed three of her letters, *PL* 1, introduction, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii. See Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries, c. 1275-1535* (Cambridge, 1922), ch. 6; Orme (whose work has shown an increasing interest in the education of girls), *Childhood to Chivalry*, pp. 16-17, 26-8, 31-2, 80, 84-5, 156-62; Alexandra Barratt (ed.), *Women's Writing in Middle English* (London, 1992), introduction, pp. 2-5. Recent studies which stress that women's writing skills may have been more developed than has long been thought are Julia Boffey's "Women Authors and Women's Literacy in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century England" in Carol M. Meale (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain 1150-1500* (Cambridge, 1993), and Barron's "Education and Training of Girls".

⁶A most stimulating recent discussion of the literacy of the peasantry, and their silencing by both medieval and modern scholars, is Steven Justice's *Writing and Rebellion*.

the Yorkshire wolds, steadfastly refused to confirm a contract of marriage with Robert Chew. "I never contracted with him except under the condition that he should remain as free and unbound on his part as I on mine"⁷. As already noted (above, pp. 24-5), the clerk recorded that Agnes' main objection was Robert's relatives' habit of calling her "lass". Agnes appears an attractively feisty girl, and her refusal to be bound in marriage could be read as an ironic, exuberant outburst against the inequality inherent in medieval marriage. But her objections may have been quite specific, rather than abstract or idealistic. Perhaps she was referring to property arrangements. She certainly seems to have a sense of her own interests, but to what extent can that sense be labelled autonomy? If financial considerations were those causing her anxiety, would she not then be reacting within the expectations defined by her social status? Her objections to being called "lass" may, indeed, have been inspired by class perceptions.

Another problem relating to the use of the concept of autonomy is more philosophical. Since historians of the twelfth century began to claim that that century saw the discovery of the individual, a debate has arisen over what the nature of the idea of the medieval "self" may have consisted⁸. Caroline Walker Bynum argues that the twelfth century did not see the discovery of the "individual" - the unique, free-standing individual with an inner core of personality separate from external behaviour - but rather of a "self" with an inner life which went hand in hand with the sense of belonging to a group⁹. Richard Logan has also argued for a medieval idea of the self defined as a member of a group. For example, as a member of orthodox Christendom one looks inside oneself and finds Christ¹⁰. Talal Asad has explored similar ideas in his examination of the effects of

⁷"Ego numquam contraxi secum nisi sub condicione quod stetisset tam liber et solutus ex parte sua sicut ego ex parte mea", B.I.H.R. CP. F 189.

⁸Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200* (London, 1972); John F. Benton, *Self and Society in Medieval France: The Memoirs of Abbot Guibert of Nogent* (New York, 1970); Caroline Walker Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), rp. from *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31 (1980); Colin Morris, "Individualism in the Twelfth Century: Some Further Reflections" in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31 (1980), 195-206.

⁹Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?", esp. pp. 85-106.

¹⁰Richard D. Logan, "A Conception of the Self in the Later Middle Ages", in *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986), 253-68. I owe this and the following reference to John Arnold.

monasticism on the monastic subject¹¹. He argues that monasticism is a structure in which "obedient wills" are created. That is, obedience is not obtained through force or fear, as may be the case in, for example, a prison, but through a programme of discipline whose aim and effect is to create the will to obey. Thus the "self" is constructed, with the collusion of the individual subject, along the lines of an already constructed model. Here again, the "self" is an aspect of a wider group identity.

Michel Foucault traces a broad outline of different perceptions of, or approaches to, the "self" in different historical periods¹². The modern western - or, as Foucault puts it, "Californian" - idea of the self holds that one can search for and discover one's "true" self, and aim to understand it through psychoanalysis. In late antiquity the self was something to be cared for, to be trained and shaped into a work of art, to be made as near to perfection as possible. The Christian approach to the self, and therefore that which prevailed in the middle ages, was that the self must be constantly monitored and ultimately renounced, for in it lay concupiscence and other weak desires.

Note that in these formulations the "self" is not obliterated - there is a subject who takes the decisions to find or shape his or herself - but rather the focus is on what the subject *does* with the self - find, perfect or renounce. Note also that where the modern emphasis is on the subject's interest in and control over his or herself - the attainment of autonomy - the emphasis of the medieval period (according to Foucault) was on the control of another party over the subject. Both Asad and Foucault focus on the role of the church in this process, but one could extend their model and examine ways in which discourses other than the clerical - for example discourses of class - concern themselves with the construction of the subject.

This discussion of the degrees to which "autonomy" was available to young Englishwomen of the later middle ages will take its lead from these ideas. It does not deny that a notion of the potentially autonomous self existed for such maidens, but suggests that it may be beyond our ability to discover whether a life of self-determination and personal agency was important to those young women. Rather it considers the construction of maidenly identities, who created them, and in whose interest it was to try to control or alter

¹¹Talal Asad, "On Ritual and Discipline in Medieval Christian Monasticism" in *Economy and Society* 16 (1987), 159-203.

¹²Interview with Foucault in "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress" in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth, 1984), pp. 361-2.

such identities. This approach will not be exhaustive, but will focus on a few key areas. First, as an introduction, there will be a summary of the social circumstances in which young women found themselves. That is, it will look at where young women lived, how they were occupied, what their economic circumstances were, with whom they had social contact, and under whose authority (if anybody's) they lived. This introductory section is meant to place in context the analysis which follows. The latter will focus firstly on spatial analysis, examining the physical contexts in which maidens of different social groups lived and/or worked, their interaction with others, and who controlled their spatial interaction and why. These considerations will be contrasted with texts which call for restrictions upon young women's movement and interaction with others, in order to point out the interests and agendas of different groups who were concerned with young women's movements. The second main area of investigation will look at another aspect of young women's physical autonomy, that is the notion of the female subject within the laws and literature of rape, and their changes over time. Again, questions of who was controlling these discourses, and why, will be examined.

CHAPTER THREE

DEGREES OF AUTONOMY

Maidenhood, Family and Household

Maidenhood may be defined most generally as a period in women's life cycle characterised by a tension between sexuality and chastity. But the influence of this tension, and the forms that it took, were not identical across the social groups. Maidenhood in the lower peasantry or working urban society was defined to an extent according to this tension, but not to the same extent that maidenhood in the upper peasantry, or in the merchant class, gentry or aristocracy was. The contention here is that approaches to maidenhood, including the degrees of independence allowed to daughters in matters of living circumstances, socialising, courtship and choice of marriage partner, were dependent on the notions of family or household identity which operated within a particular social group. "Maidenhood" did not have precisely the same meanings across the social spectrum, but rather took on different identities according to the social position and outlook of the family or household of which the young woman was part. Families which were in a position to provide for their daughters' social and financial futures placed greater control over the activities of their daughters than families which were not able to make such provisions. For the latter group, however, control over activities was often provided by the heads of other households to which the maidens went to live and work. This chapter analyses some of the forms of control or degrees of autonomy experienced by maidens according to considerations of class, and the identities which different social groups constructed for maidens. First, I shall provide an introductory summary of the living and working circumstances of maidens of different social groups (that is, whether they were at home, or in service, or apprenticeship in another household), what their economic circumstances were, who had authority over them, and what forms of control were exerted over their lives.

Peasant maidens, of all levels, were more likely to remain at home during their maidenhood than were their urban sisters. Goldberg's analysis of both rural and urban poll tax returns, particularly from 1379 but also from 1377, indicates a greater tendency for rural households to retain their children of tax paying age (over sixteen in 1379, over fourteen in 1377) within the natal household than was usual in urban households¹. Those who did

¹Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, pp. 165-8; idem, "Urban Identity and the Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379, and 1381" in *Economic History Review* 43 (1990), 194-216, pp. 212-3.

leave home to go into service may have done so as much out of necessity as desire, as Goldberg's study shows that such women were especially drawn from arable areas, which did not offer the wage-earning opportunities for women which pastoral areas did². That maidens at home did not form a burden on the household but were, rather, active contributors to the home economy is indicated by the 1379 returns for Howden and Howdenshire, where the occupations of the daughters living within the natal home is usually recorded³. How precise these designations of occupations were, however, is unsure, as the great majority are simply recorded as "servant", and most of the remainder registered as "labourer". The more precise designations of "webster" and "brewster" do appear, but in small numbers⁴.

It seems most likely that rural girls remained at home during their teenage years when there was a place for them within the family or manorial economy. The rolls of the Wakefield manor court and tourn for the earlier fourteenth century, which usually describe women according to their family or marital status, record high numbers of women described as "daughters" involved in land transactions⁵. Of the 127 recorded land transactions involving women, and here I include payments of heriot and of merchet⁶, 60, or just over

²Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, pp. 282-94. Pastoral areas offered women more work in the form of carding, spinning, weaving, washing and shearing sheep, milking sheep and cows, and making butter and cheese.

³"Assessment Roll of the Poll-Tax for Howdenshire, Etc., in the Second Year of the Reign of King Richard II. (1379)", in *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 9 (1886), 129-62. Goldberg notes that these returns are exceptional in their detail, recording often not only the occupation of the head of household, but of other members, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, p. 87; "Urban Identity and the Poll Taxes", p. 196.

⁴Of the 115 daughters (*filiae*) in the returns who appear to be living within their natal homes, 79 are called "servant", 17 are called "labourer", 5 are called "webster", 2 are called "brewster" and 12 are not given occupations.

⁵I have taken two samples from the rolls, each covering the records of manor court and tourn for about a year; William Paley Baildon (ed.), "Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield", *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 36 (1906), pp. 53-114 (October/November 1306 - September 1307) and John Lister (ed.), "Court Rolls...Wakefield", *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 57 (1917), pp. 1-68 (October 1313 to September 1314). From a total of 702 women, 516, or 73.5%, are defined in relation to another, that is as "daughter", "wife", "widow" or "handmaid".

⁶Merchet was ostensibly a fine which was paid to allow a servile woman to marry, but historians have argued that it had a function more closely related to other manorial fines for land transactions. Eleanor Searle has argued that merchet acted as a tax on dowry for wealthy peasant girls, for whom dowry was a form of pre-mortem inheritance. It reserved part of the family holding for the use of the daughter and her husband upon marrying. She henceforth had no claim on the sibling who would inherit the bulk of the family property. One consequence of this was a parallel reduction in the proportion of the chattels to which the lord would be entitled upon the death of the head of the family. Thus merchet, argues Searle, acted as a form of compensation for this future reduction in the lord's entitlement. See the debate between Eleanor Searle and

47%, are described as "daughters". The next most frequent appellation is "widow", with 23 appearances, or just over 18%. These figures indicate that young unmarried women were active in the pre-plague Wakefield land market, either buying, selling, or inheriting land. Bennett notes a striking tendency for unmarried sons and daughters to engage in land transactions on the manor of Brigstock before the plague, with their activities representing a quarter of all land transactions, and she argues that the social status of the young men and women involved had little influence on their ability to engage in such activity⁷. Her study of merchet payments on the Ramsey manor from 1398 to 1458 suggests that peasant maidens possessed a degree of economic autonomy in the post-Plague period too, as one third of merchets over that period were paid by the bride herself. Young women probably earned the money to pay their own merchets through engaging in wage labour⁸.

Not all peasant maidens, however, derived their ability to engage in economic activity from the same sources. Low status peasant women were probably not often able to be provided for by their families, and needed to resort to wage labour. This may have entailed leaving home for a period in service, especially after the Black Death when demand for wage labour was high⁹. Razi's study of pre- and post-Plague Halesowen indicates that sons and daughters not uncommonly gained land while their fathers were still alive, and that this tendency grew even stronger following the Black Death, when land was in abundance¹⁰. Such *inter vivos* transactions were, however, more likely to take place among wealthy than poorer peasantry¹¹. Goldberg notes that the provision of dowries, too, was possible only in wealthy peasant families¹². Economic activity in the form of land and property transactions,

Jean Scammell: Jean Scammell, "Freedom and Marriage in Medieval England" in *Economic History Review* ser. 2, 27 (1974), 523-37; Eleanor Searle, "Freedom and Marriage in Medieval England: An Alternative Hypothesis" in *Economic History Review* ser. 2, 29 (1976), 482-6; Jean Scammell, "Wife-Rents and Merchet" in *Economic History Review* ser. 2, 29 (1976), 487-90; Eleanor Searle, "Seigneurial Control of Women's Marriage: The Antecedents and Function of Merchet in England" in *Past and Present* 82 (1979), 3-43; Paul A Brand and Paul R. Hyams, "Debate: Seigneurial Control of Women's Marriage" including contributions by Brand and Hyams, Rosamund Faith and Eleanor Searle in *Past and Present* 99 (1983), 123-160.

⁷Bennett, *Women... Countryside*, pp. 78-81.

⁸Bennett, "Medieval Peasant Marriage".

⁹Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle* pp. 282-90.

¹⁰Razi, *Life Marriage and Death*, pp. 57-60, 135.

¹¹Razi, *Life Marriage and Death*, pp. 57-60.

¹²Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, pp. 156-7, 245-6, 275-7.

therefore, does not provide a straightforward guide to the economic position of peasant maidens and the degree of family provision for them. Within family economies which had a place for teenage daughters, young women could be kept at home and their futures provided for. Within weaker family economies, on the other hand, girls may have been able to engage in land transactions, but were more likely to have needed to do so out of their own earnings.

This difference in the economic position of low and high status peasant girls was, I argue, behind the differences in degrees of control over their sexual behaviour, courtship and marriage choices which girls of the two groups experienced. Bennett and Goldberg have both noted that poor peasant families exerted little control over the courtship behaviour and marriage choices of their daughters, while wealthy peasant parents frequently controlled, or even forced, their daughters' marriages¹³. Razi has found that while few daughters of rich peasants were amerced for leyrwite in Halesowen, numerous daughters of middling peasants and many daughters of poor peasants were amerced, and he argues thus that middling or lower status peasant girls were more likely to engage in pre-marital sex and produce illegitimate children¹⁴. Poos and Smith, in a critique of Razi, rightly point out that the disproportionate ameracements among lower status girls may represent not a social reality - in which lower status girls were more sexually active and not firmly controlled - but rather an attempt by the higher status peasants who made up the ranks of presentment juries to expose and punish the actions of girls from status groups lower than their own, while not drawing attention to the activities of their own daughters¹⁵. Whichever interpretation is more correct, however, it would appear that wealthier peasants controlled, or at least showed greater concern over, the sexual and courtship practices of their daughters. I suggest that the different degrees of concern grew out of the economic standing of the individual families. In families which were able to provide for the futures of their daughters, those daughters were more fully incorporated within family identity. Their activities, therefore, would have an impact on the social standing of the family as a whole,

¹³Bennett, *Women...Countryside*, pp. 93-99; Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, esp. pp. 246-51, and idem, "Fiction in the Archives: The York Cause Papers as a Source for Later Medieval History" in *Continuity and Change*, forthcoming.

¹⁴Razi, *Life Marriage and Death*, pp. 66-71. Note, though, that his primary interest here is in calculating age at marriage, not in discussing degrees of parental control *per se*.

¹⁵L.R. Poos and R.M. Smith, "Legal Windows onto Historical Populations? Recent Research on Demography and the Manor Court in Medieval England" in *Law and History Review* 2 (1984), 128-52, p. 150.

and thus needed to be more tightly regulated. This idea will be explored more fully in the final chapter, in the discussion on virginity.

The same idea can aid in analysing the circumstances of girls in urban society, where many were in service outside their natal homes. Some urban maidens remained living and working within their parents' homes, as is indicated for example in the 1461 Bristol ordinance against the labour of weavers' "wyfes, doughtours and maidens" alongside their husbands, fathers or masters, which includes daughters as members of the household economy¹⁶. Goldberg has suggested that the practice of keeping girls at home became stronger among the York urban elite of the later fifteenth century, as service became a less respectable occupation¹⁷. But for the bulk of our period it is clear that service was a key element of maidenhood as a life cycle stage for young urban women¹⁸.

A small number of girls went into indentured apprenticeships, but these were concentrated into the London silk trade, which seems to have been dominated by women workers in this period¹⁹. There seem to have been very few female apprentices in towns outside of London²⁰, and even there it is possible that the visibility of female apprentices in such records as the calendars of letter books and plea and memoranda rolls has created an optical illusion of their importance²¹. Such published sources are far more accessible

¹⁶Francis B. Bickley (ed.), *The Little Red Book of Bristol*, 2 vols., (Bristol, 1900), vol. 2, p. 127. See Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M.M. Postan (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 55, 60.

¹⁷Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, pp. 201, 339.

¹⁸P.J.P. Goldberg. "Women in Fifteenth-Century Town Life" in John A.F. Thomson (ed.), *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1988), *Women Work and Life Cycle*, ch. 4; Maryanne Kowaleski, "Women's Work in a Market Town: Exeter in the Late Fourteenth Century" in Barbara A. Hanawalt (ed.), *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe* (Bloomington, 1986), esp. pp. 153-4.

¹⁹The London silkwomen caught the attention of some of the earliest historians with an interest in women's history. See Marian K. Dale, "The London Silkwomen of the Fifteenth Century" in *Economic History Review* ser. 1, no. 4 (1933), 324-35, reprinted with an essay by Maryanne Kowawelski and Judith M. Bennett, "Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages: Fifty Years After Marian K. Dale" in Judith M. Bennett, Elizabeth A. Clark, Jean F. O'Barr, B. Anne Nilen and Sarah Westphal-Wihl (eds.), *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1989). See also A. Abram, "Women Traders in Medieval London" in *The Economic Journal* 26 (1916), 276-85, p. 278.

²⁰An unusual reference to a York female apprentice appears in a York cause paper from 1402, in which it is mentioned that one Isabella de Wakefield is apprentice to Christiana de Knarisburgh, *sutricia* (sempstress), B.I.H.R. CP. F 22, Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, p. 191. Kowaleski has found only one reference to a female "servant and apprentice" in the Exeter records, "Women's Work in a Market Town", p. 163, n. 56.

²¹A.H. Thomas and Philip E. Jones (eds.), *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London*, 6 vols. (Cambridge, 1926-61), vol. 1, p. 274; vol. 2, pp. 107, 219; vol. 3, p. 240; vol. 4, pp. 12, 42-3, 53-4, 71, 146-7, 162, 166, 166-7, 176, 208, 227, 229; vol. 5, pp. 14-15, 65, 88.

than the cause paper material and borough court rolls employed by Goldberg and Kowaleski, and thus through frequent citation the records of female apprenticeship contained there have taken on an importance in regard to women's work which they do not merit outside of the context of London²².

Girls, in principle at least, did not often leave home to enter service or apprenticeship before their early teens. The youngest servants Goldberg has found are twelve, while girls were not supposed to be entered into apprenticeships before the age of fourteen²³. In doing so they entered into a relationship with their employer, master or mistress which was more than a straightforward economic one. It is not even clear whether servant girls always earned a wage, or were sometimes supported during their term of employment, paid in kind, and sometimes remembered in employers' wills²⁴. Female apprentices often travelled some distance, usually to London, to take up apprenticeships²⁵, and once there they entered a position of economic dependence upon their masters and mistresses. The indentures require

Reginald R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London*, 11 vols. (London, 1899-1912), E, p. 200; F, p. 142; G, pp. 105, 165; H, pp. 3, 5, 169, 185-6, 340-1, 357-8, 391, 405-6; K, p. 208.

²²Abram, "Women Traders", pp. 278, 280-2; Dale, "London Silkwomen", in Bennett et al. (eds.), *Sisters and Workers*, pp. 27-9; Thrupp, "Merchant Class", pp. 171-2; Power, *Medieval Women*, pp. 57-8, and most recently Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, pp. 142-4. Cf. Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, pp. 191-2, 334; Judith M. Bennett, "Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide" in David Aers (ed.), *Culture and History, 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing* (London, 1992), p. 160. The fairly high incidence of appearances of female apprentices before the London mayor's court could have been caused by the rather haphazard way in which female apprentices seem to have been taken on, without the formal enrolment procedure normal for boys - see Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, p. 143. Many of the incidences of dispute between female apprentice and master or mistress brought before the courts indeed focused on fines for non-enrolment. On the other hand, Caroline Barron has contended that the evidence that four of the dozen or so surviving apprenticeship indentures relate to girls suggests that apprenticeship was not an insignificant institution for London girls, "Education and Training of Girls", pp. 144-6.

²³Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, pp. 168-71.
Two cases from the mayor's court in London, in 1417 and 1429, exonerate female apprentices from their contracts at least partly on the grounds that they were under fourteen at the time of entering their apprenticeships: *CPM* 4, pp. 53-4, 229.

²⁴Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, pp. 182-6. For examples of servants remembered in wills see Goldberg (ed. and trans.), *Women in England*, pp. 88, 94, 96; Ward, *Women... Nobility and Gentry*, pp. 189, 225, 229.

²⁵In 1447 Eleanor Fyncham, daughter of Thomas Fyncham, "gentilman" of the county of Norfolk, was apprenticed to William and Anne Rotheley to learn the latter's trade as silkthrowster, Norfolk Record Office, Hare Mss 2091. For her generosity in supplying me with references to this and other apprenticeship indentures, I am very grateful to Dr Caroline Barron. In a complaint brought before the mayor's court in London, 1422, it is mentioned that Alice Saumple of Norham, Northumberland and Agnes Saumple of Newcastle on Tyne had entered apprenticeships in London, *CPM* 4, pp. 146-7. See also Dale, "London Silkwomen" in Bennett et al. (eds.), *Sisters and Workers*, pp. 27-8, for female apprentices from Lincoln and Yorkshire.

that the girl's master and mistress, in return for her service and loyalty, find her in food, drink, clothes of linen and wool, footwear, a bed, and other necessities²⁶.

Given these conditions, it seems possible that servants and apprentices experienced little more "autonomy" in their economic and living circumstances than did girls who stayed at home. For both servants and apprentices shared a roof with their employers, and it is apparent that those employers or mistresses took on quasi-parental roles in relation to the young women. The apprenticeship indentures make it clear that the master or mistress was responsible not only for the support of their apprentice but for controlling her social and sexual activities, stating that she might not frequent taverns, play unseemly games, commit fornication or adultery, or marry without permission²⁷. Many of the female apprentices in the London records were orphans, suggesting that apprenticeship was a strategy for dealing with young girls in wardship²⁸. Apprenticeship, then, seems hardly to represent a step away from parental supervision and dependence, but rather its replacement by an analogous, though certainly not identical, situation. It seems significant that the London silkwomen were anxious to emphasize the respectability of their households, and in their 1455 petition to Parliament stated that they "lyved full honourably, and therwith many good Householdes kept, and many Gentilwymmen and other in grete noubre like as there noew be moo than a M, haue be drawn under theym in lernyng the same Craftes and occupation ful vertueusly"²⁹. One wonders if the emphasis on gentility and respectability increased during the fifteenth century. Katherine Nougale, apprenticed in 1392, is described

²⁶Indenture of Eleanor Fyncham, Norfolk Record Office, Hare Mss 2091; Indenture of Katherine Nougale, Corporation of London Record Office, Misc. Mss 1863; Indenture of Margaret Seford, Westminster Abbey Muniment 5966. These were standard requirements and also found in apprenticeship indentures for boys. See for example Maud Sellers (ed.), *York Memorandum Book*, 2 vols., Surtees Society 120 and 125 (1912, 1915) vol. 1, pp. 54-55 (indenture dated 1371), and York Merchant Adventurers' Hall Mss (indenture dated 1364).

²⁷N.R.O. Hare 2091; C.L.R.O. Misc. 1863; W.A.M. 5966.

²⁸Of the indentured girls, Margaret Seford, Katherine Nougale and Eleanor Fyncham were possibly all orphans, as their fathers did not take an active role in entering them into apprenticeship, acting as pledges or mainpernors, or providing permission to marry.

Of the twelve incidences of female apprenticeship in the Letter Books covering the period 1335-1436, all twelve girls were orphans. Not too much should be made of this, as the reasons for the disputes being brought to the mayor's court were presumably as much to do with their orphaned state, and the role of the mayor and alderman in overseeing their wardship, as with their apprenticed positions. Only one of the nineteen cases from the plea and memoranda rolls, covering the period 1364-1445, appears to deal with an orphan, *CPM* 5, p. 65. Yet of the others only four were clearly not orphans, as their fathers were involved in the court proceedings, *CPM* 2, p. 107; 4, pp. 42-3, 53-4, 229. Perhaps it would be safe to conclude that orphans made up a disproportionate number of female apprentices.

²⁹Quoted in Dale, "London Silkwomen" in Bennett et al. (eds.), *Sisters and Workers*, p. 27.

as the daughter of a London haberdasher, while Eleanor Fyncham in 1447 is described as the daughter of a Norfolk "Gentilman"³⁰. The latter designation is interesting, but a more thorough study would be necessary to indicate its significance.

Such forms of control are less explicit in the case of servants, but there is fragmentary evidence that contractual arrangements were at least sometimes formalised in writing between employer and servant³¹. Such formalities may have done no more than fix the term of employment, but it appears that employers often exercised greater influence over the servants under their roofs than this. Deponents in a case brought before the York consistory court in 1417 narrate how John Bown, a cordwainer, found his servants Margaret Barker and John Waryngton in compromising circumstances in an upper room in his house, and, believing the worst, forced John Waryngton to contract marriage with Margaret, threatening him with action under common law if he did not submit³². Presumably the proposed charge was breach of contract, such as apprentices were subject to, for committing fornication within the employer's house. This case thus suggests that employers had not only an informal, discretionary role in regulating their servants' activities, but sometimes had a formal legal role as well.

Yet control of maidens who were not daughters of the household should be interpreted somewhat differently from parental concern over the behaviour of girls. Girls in apprenticeship or service had a place within the household economy of their employers or mistresses, but this had a different meaning from the family provision for daughters living at home. In the case of female apprentices or servants, their behaviour could affect the respectability of the house which they had gone to work in during the time that they were there, but longer-term concerns did not apply. Thus there is evidence of considerable concern about girls' social and sexual activities during the term of their employment, but little control over their choice of marriage partner³³. Maidens in service or apprenticeship therefore experienced what at first sight looks like a greater degree of autonomy in regard to their courtship and marriage choices than maidens of more substantial families. It should be remembered, however, that this "autonomy" was enabled only by an impoverished and

³⁰CL.R.O. Misc. 1863; N.R.O. Hare 2091.

³¹Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, p. 175.

³²B.I.H.R. CP. F 127. Extracts from this cause are translated in Goldberg (ed. and trans.), *Women in England*, pp. 110-114.

³³Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, pp. 246-51.

disadvantaged home background which could not provide for their futures, and thus was less concerned to exert strong control over them.

As will have been apparent from this discussion of the living and economic circumstances of young rural and urban women, these social groups are increasingly well served by historians. Perhaps surprisingly, noble maidens have received less attention. The practice of gentry and aristocratic families sending their teenage sons and daughters to board in the households of their peers or social superiors has been noted by numerous historians with an interest in education or the upbringing of young noblewomen³⁴, but my intention here is to suggest that this practice may be labelled "service" as much as "education". In 1465 Margaret Paston wrote to John III concerning his sister, probably Anne, "I grete you wele, letyng you wete that asfor your sustrys beyng wyth my lady, if your fadere wull aggrey ther-to I hold me right wele pleasyd, for I wuld be right clad þat she shuld do here *servyse* be-for any othere". Before 1466 Sir John Heveningham wrote to Margaret Paston requesting a place in her home for a kinswoman, "I wrote vn-to you for myn cosyn Anneys Loveday to haue ben in your *seruice*"³⁵. Thus some young noblewomen, not entirely unlike lower status maidens, experienced a period of service during their maidenhood. This seems particularly notable when the low status of service in contemporary Italy is considered³⁶. A late fifteenth-century Venetian visitor was appalled by the English practice of sending their children into service (and he seems to have exaggerated the youth of those children, perhaps for effect), and claimed that everyone, "however rich he may be", engaged in this practice³⁷. His dismay seems to have been borne out of his failure to recognise that service in English society was not a shameful occupation, but rather had, as Rosemary Horrox puts it, "some claim to be considered the

³⁴The noble practice of boarding out their children in other households is discussed by Orme, *Childhood to Chivalry*, esp. pp. 44-60; Kate Mertes, *The English Noble Household 1250-1600: Good Governance and Politic Rule* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 170, 173; Ward, *English Noblewomen* pp. 95-7; Kirby, "Women in the P.C.", pp. 222, 227-8; Haskell, "Paston Women on Marriage", pp. 464, 470; H.S. Bennett was an early historian to be struck by the practice, *The Pastons and their England*, pp. 82-6.

³⁵ *PL* 1, p. 308, and 2, p. 350, emphases mine.

³⁶Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "Women Servants in Florence During the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries" in Barbara Hanawalt (ed.), *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe* (Bloomington, 1986); Michael E. Goodich, "Ancilla Dei: The Servant as Saint in the Late Middle Ages" in Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F. Wemple (eds.), *Women of the Medieval World* (Oxford, 1985); Smith, "Geographical Diversity".

³⁷*A Relation, or rather a True Account, of the Island of England c. 1500*, ed. C.A. Sneyd, Camden Society ser. 1, vol. 37 (1847), pp. 24-5.

dominant ethic of the middle ages" in English society, at all social levels³⁸.

Horrox is particularly interested in the phenomenon of the English nobleman in service, and the social and political importance of his role. I say "his", because Horrox discusses only the service of men. The idea that noblewomen too, performed service for their peers or near peers has been largely overlooked. To be sure, noblewomen in service were far fewer in number, and of lesser political importance, than noblemen in service. Kate Mertes, whose study of the members and structure of noble households is invaluable for any analysis of service within the nobility, argues that "female household members were practically nonexistent", and that most of those which we do find were lady's damsels or chambermaids, who were usually of similar social status to the lady, and were usually young single women³⁹. I do not dispute the small numbers, but rather than dismiss them for this, argue that the existence of these "damsels", "maidens", "ladies-in-waiting", "gentlewomen" or "chamberers", and the nature of their service, certainly bear analysis. I can do no more than provide a brief introduction to the subject here, but the sources are plentiful and promising enough to suggest that a thorough investigation of the subject, for example as part of a study of the political role of noblewomen, would bear fruit⁴⁰.

There is a problem, however, with using such evidence in regard to the circumstances

³⁸Rosemary Horrox, "Service" in eadem (ed.), *Fifteenth Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 61.

³⁹Mertes, *English Noble Household*, pp. 42-3, 57-8. See also Ward, *English Noblewomen*, pp. 52-4.

⁴⁰References to noble women as servants to other noble women are available in numerous accessible sources. For such references within household ordinances and accounts see A.R. Myers (ed.), *The Household of Edward IV: The Black Book and the Ordinance of 1478* (Manchester, 1959), pp. 71-2, 92, 225; C.D. Ross, "The Household Accounts of Elizabeth Berkeley, Countess of Warwick, 1420-1" in *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* 70 (1951), 81-105, pp. 89, 91, 95; C.M. Woolgar (ed.), *Household Accounts from Medieval England*, 2 vols., The British Academy Records of Social and Economic History 17 and 18 (1992), pp. 128, 136, 239, 586, 662, 671; "Ordinances for the Household Made at Eltham in the XVIIth Year of King Henry VII, A.D. 1526" and "Orders and Rules of the House of the Princess Cecill" in *A Collection of Ordinances and Regulations for the Government of the Royal Household*, Society of Antiquaries of London (London, 1790), pp. 173, 193; Thomas Percy (ed.), *The Regulations and Establishment of the Household of Henry Algernon Percy at his Castles of Wreshill and Likinfield in Yorkshire* (a.k.a. *Northumberland Household Book*) (London, 1827), pp. 43, 46, 73-9, 80-81, 96, 120, 253, 256, 301; Nicholas Harris Nicholas (ed.), *Privy Purse Expenses of Elizabeth of York. Household Accounts of Edward the Fourth* (London, 1830), passim. esp. pp. 40, 60.

The wills of noblewomen also sometimes include references to *domicellae*, gentlewomen, chamberers and maidens. See for example Raine (ed.) *Test. Ebor* 1, pp. 151, 293, 382-3; 2, p. 122; 4, pp. 6, 189, 258; 5, pp. 51, 202, 297. There are, of course, many more references to female servants as *serviens*, *ancilla* or *famula*, but I have not included these as they probably refer to lower status servants. See also Ward (ed.), *Women...Nobility and Gentry*, pp. 189-90, 225, 228.

Other sources which provide references to damsels or gentlewomen in service include chronicles, letters, and accounts by foreign travellers, but there are too many to list them all here.

of noble maidens, as it is not often easy to establish the age and marital status of the recorded damsels and gentlewomen. It might be assumed that sources referring to damsels or *domicellae* refer to maidens, as would normally be expected with these diminutive forms of dame or *domina*, but this rule seems often to be broken when the terms refer to professional rather than marital status. This problem is illustrated by the example of Philippa Chaucer, wife of Geoffrey, who had been *domicella* to Queen Philippa, and even after her marriage in 1366 continued to be referred to by this term in records concerning this post, and as "damoysele" in her position within the household of John of Gaunt in 1372⁴¹. On the other hand, Polydore Vergil in his chronicle mentioned " a certain damosell of thage of twentie yeres, or thereabouts, a damosell so called for that she had preservyd her virginitie".⁴²

There is, furthermore, some slight evidence that service could provide an occupation and living for noblewomen who never married. During her late twenties Elizabeth Paston was in the household of Lady Pole, and at least some money was being paid for her by her mother. But Agnes, beginning to worry that Elizabeth's marriage prospects were becoming increasingly slim, noted to herself to tell her daughter that she must "use hyr-selfe to werke redyly as other jentylwomen don, and sumwhat to helpe hyr-selfe ther-wyth"⁴³. The Plumpton correspondence contains a letter from Katherine Chatterton to her brother George Plumpton, begging him to find for her sister-in-law a "goodly yong woman, that is a good woman of her body and pay, iij and xx or more"⁴⁴. Some bequests among the *Testamenta Eboracensia* suggest, but more tentatively, that the occupation of gentlewoman could be a long term one. One Agnes Amyas appears in the will of the Countess of Cambridge in 1446, where she is left ten marks on the condition that "she remain in my service and not marry"⁴⁵. An Agnes Amyas appears eight years later in the will of Lady Joan Wombwell, indicating that, if it is the same Agnes, the gentlewoman indeed remained unmarried at

⁴¹Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson (eds.), *Chaucer Life Records* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 67-93.

⁴²Polydore Vergil, *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History, Comprising the Reigns of Henry VI., Edward IV., and Richard III.*, ed. Henry Ellis, Camden Society ser. 1, vol. 29 (1844), p. 24.

⁴³PL 1, p. 42.

⁴⁴PC, p. xxxix.

⁴⁵Test. Ebor. 2, p. 122.

least up to that time⁴⁶. And in the 1485 will of Dame Margaret Pigot, gentlewoman Elizabeth Roclyff was bequeathed Dame Margaret's "chef messuage with the lands within the towne of Swathorp and Multhorp, for the term of her lyve", for her "goode and longe service"⁴⁷. This last gentlewoman, however, may have been a widow or married woman.

The sources in which we can most safely identify young unmarried noblewomen as servants are the letter collections of the Paston, Stonor, Plumpton and Lisle families. Elizabeth, Margery and Anne Paston, Jane and Isabel Stonor, Dorothy Plumpton, and Anne and Mary Bassett - stepdaughters of Viscount Lisle - all spent periods in houses of relatives or high-status acquaintances⁴⁸. Their reasons for being sent into service were probably less directly economic than for lower status maidens, and more for training in behaviour that was desirable of both their class and their gender, that is, to learn nobility and learn femininity. The *Westminster Chronicler* notes that in 1387 Elizabeth of Lancaster was sent to court, in order to learn courtly habits and manners⁴⁹. Gentry girls were probably sent to learn skills which would benefit them in future years as wives and managers of large and respectable households⁵⁰. An added function of the process must have been to aid in their marriage prospects - through learning proper feminine behaviour in the company of men, or through meeting prospective husbands or extending networks of association through which courtship could be arranged. Christine Carpenter notes that Joan, the daughter of William Muston, a Yorkshire gentleman, was sent to stay with her uncle in Warwickshire, and at least one reason for her stay was the hope that this would help to find her a husband⁵¹. A noble girl was good for little if she was not good for marriage. This is a point which will be returned to in the analysis of control over noble maiden's spatial relationships, in the section below.

Service, then, played a rather different role in the lives of noble maidens than in the lives of their urban sisters. It did not indicate the lack of family provision for them, and

⁴⁶*Test. Ebor.* 2, p. 177.

⁴⁷*Test. Ebor.* 4, p. 6.

⁴⁸*PL* 1, pp. 42, 339, 348; *SL & P* 1, pp. 122-3; 2, pp. 13-15; *PC* pp. 202-3; *LL* 3, pp. 129-215.

⁴⁹*The Westminster Chronicle, 1381-1394*, ed. L.C. Hector and Barbara F. Harvey (Oxford, 1982), p. 193.

⁵⁰Haskell, "Paston Women on Marriage", p. 464; Kirby, "Women in the Plumpton Correspondence", p. 222.

⁵¹Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401-1499* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 100.

thus, correspondingly, it did not signal their autonomy from their parents in such matters as courtship and marriage. Their behaviour, it seems, was controlled by two groups: by their families, and by the members of households in which they went to live. When Anne and Katherine Bassett were first being considered for positions at Jane Seymour's court their mother was supplied with some advice as to the girls' conduct:

it shall please your ladyship to exhort them to be sober, sad, wise and discreet and lowly above all things, and to be obedient and governed and ruled by my Lady Rutland and my Lady Sussex [with whom the girls would be staying at court], and Mrs. Margery and such others as be your ladyship's friends here; and to serve God and be virtuous, for that is much regarded, to serve God well and be sober of tongue⁵².

Evidence concerning Anne's behaviour in the household of the Countess of Sussex, to which she went after the death of Jane Seymour, shows how such a position could be threatened. Lady Sussex was so irritated by Anne that she had to be pacified by numerous letters, tokens and gifts from the Lisles before being persuaded to keep Anne on. Anne may have learned to mend her manners, as Lady Lisle was assured that "from henceforth she will use herself as demurely and discreetly as the best of her fellows"⁵³. Demureness, discretion and obedience may, at court at least and possibly in some of the greater households as well, have been enforced by older gentlewomen⁵⁴. Christine de Pizan, although writing in a French context, perhaps indicates practice in noble female households generally when she writes that older gentlewomen must be chosen for their virtuous example to the mistress and younger damsels⁵⁵.

A period spent boarding or in service in other households was probably not, however, the norm, or universal, for noble girls⁵⁶. I suspect that the appearance of universality is

⁵²LL 4, pp. 151-2.

⁵³LL 4, p. 186.

⁵⁴Among Princess Mary's retinue to her marriage to Louis XII of France in 1514 was included Lady Jane Guildford, whom Mary referred to as "Mother Guldeford", and who clearly played a protective role to the seventeen year old princess and perhaps to her maidens as well, Henry Ellis (ed.), *Original Letters, Illustrative of English History*, 11 vols. (London, 1825) ser. 1 vol. 1, pp. 113-9.

⁵⁵Christine de Pizan, *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honour: The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, trans. Charity Cannon Willard, ed. Madeleine Pelner Cosman, (New York, 1989), pp. 126-9.

⁵⁶Many commentators on the subject of noble children being boarded out have stated that this was common, or the norm: Mertes, *English Noble Household*, p. 53; Ward, *English Noblewomen*, p. 29; Orme, *Childhood to Chivalry*, p. 59; Kirby, "Women in the Plumpton Correspondence", p. 222; Bennett, *Pastons and their England*, pp. 82-6.

caused by the greater likelihood of children living outside the natal home to appear in the historical record than those who remained within it, given the greater need to refer to the financial and other arrangements concerning the former in such sources as letters. It is thus possible that a generalisation has been made on the basis of a handful of oft-cited examples. There are traces of evidence to suggest that the practice was not universal, at least. Margery Paston was nineteen or twenty before her mother, Margaret, began to seek a place for her, and then the motivation seems personal - "we be eythere of vs wery of othere", wrote Margaret⁵⁷. The household accounts of Elizabeth Berkeley, Countess of Warwick, record a hunting excursion on which she was accompanied by her three daughters who, if they were to take part in the hunt, were unlikely to have been below teenage years⁵⁸. The household book of Dame Alice de Bryene records numerous instances of "daughters" accompanying their father or mother, or sometimes going alone, on visits to Dame Alice's household for meals, suggesting a genteel world of social networks and sociable interchange of which daughters were very much a part⁵⁹. The daughters who visited on their own are likely to have been at least of teenage years.

Whether they were living at home or in another household, noble maidens were subject to considerable degrees of control. Their conduct during maidenhood was regulated for the honour of the house in which they were living, and their choice of marriage partner was closely directed for the greater good of the lineage. Canon law dictated that families could not override the consensual marriages of their children but they could certainly make life unpleasant for children who married without their blessing, as Margery Paston - cast out after her marriage to her father's steward - found out⁶⁰. The tension between sexual maturity and the necessity for chastity strongly affected the meanings of maidenhood amongst the nobility, as it did within the upper peasantry. It took different forms, and was sometimes less of a concern, amongst the parents of lower status peasant girls and the employers of servants. But maidenhood, at all social levels, should not be characterised purely as a time in which chastity was paramount. The fact of maidens' sexual maturity -

⁵⁷PL 1, p. 339.

⁵⁸Ross, "Household Accounts of Elizabeth of Berkeley", p. 89. Nicholas Orme says that fourteen was considered an appropriate age for boys to begin hunting (there is little information on women and hunting), although some royal boys began hunting during childhood, *Childhood to Chivalry*, pp. 192-3.

⁵⁹M.K. Dale (trans.) and Vincent B. Redstone (ed.), *Household Book of Dame Alice de Bryene*, Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and Natural History (Ipswich, 1931), passim.

⁶⁰PL 1, pp. 341-4, 541; 2, pp. 498-500.

that they were ripe for wifehood - equally affected this stage of their life cycle. Maidens had a divided identity - part asexual child, and part desirable woman. The complexity of their identity affected the spatial arrangements which governed their lives, as will be discussed in the next section.

Damsels in the Tower? Gender, Class and Space

The image of the damsel in the tower - the young noble maiden shut away for the protection of her chastity - has become commonplace. An image with a strong appeal to an imagination raised on fairy tales, and echoing medieval literary depictions of ladies in towers (from the ladies of Marie de France's "Guigemar" and "Yonec", imprisoned with their damsels, to Guinevere, waiting for valiant Lancelot⁶¹), it has struck some historians as having the force of truth. Georges Duby writes of the segregation of noble maidens in France, "carefully watched to protect their virginity until the moment when they were conveyed in solemn cortège to the castle of their future spouse"⁶². Nicholas Orme cites Giles of Rome's recommendations in *De Regimine Principum* that girls be kept secluded, and feels that this seclusion was "probably also practised", and contrasts it with the practice of bringing adolescent boys into company⁶³. He also notes Vincent of Beauvais' *De Eruditione Filiorum Nobilium*, which recommends the guarding and seclusion of girls, though remarks that Vincent's treatise never had the influence that Giles' did⁶⁴. Have historians made too much of such didactic pronouncements on the upbringing of noble girls, and turned them into an aspect of social, rather than literary, history? The statements on noble maidens' enclosure sit uneasily with the evidence for their role in service discussed above. Girls in later medieval England, it seems, were not necessarily shut away like sleeping beauties, but made their way into the world. But, for those who did go into service, did they find themselves in enclosed all female communities, protected from the

⁶¹Marie de France, "Guigemar" and "Yonec" in Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (eds. and trans.), *The Lais of Marie de France* (Harmondsworth, 1986); "Lancelot del Lac" in H. Oskar Sommer (ed.), *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, 6 vols. (New York, 1979), vol. 4, pp. 160-210.

⁶²Georges Duby, "The Aristocratic Households of Feudal France" in idem (ed.), *A History of Private Life* vol. 2, *Revelations of the Medieval World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), p. 69.

⁶³Orme, *Childhood to Chivalry*, pp. 31-32.

⁶⁴Orme, *Childhood to Chivalry*, pp. 106-7; Vincent of Beauvais, *De Eruditione Filiorum Nobilium*, ed. Arpad Steiner (Cambridge, Mass., 1938), pp. 172-6. On Vincent's theory of education for girls generally see Rosemary Barton Tobin, "Vincent of Beauvais on the Education of Women" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35 (1974), 485-9.

masculine world (or with the masculine world protected from them⁶⁵)? The following discussion will consider the spatial organisation of noble houses, and the evidence regarding the spatial control over young women within those houses.

The subject of the role of space in constructing and reflecting social relationships has been developed within anthropology and explored within the discipline of archaeology⁶⁶. In those fields it is recognised that the material conditions created by a particular culture, and the ways in which those material conditions shape or reflect mobility, restriction and interaction within particular spaces, may be read as evidence of the social structures and relationships at work within that culture. As Roberta Gilchrist puts it, "Space forms the arena in which social relationships are negotiated, expressed through the construction of landscapes, architecture and boundaries"⁶⁷. Gilchrist is prominent within medieval studies as an archaeologist who has considered gender relations as an important element within the spatial organisation of such material structures as monasteries and castles⁶⁸. She argues that "gender domains" existed within castles from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, that is, that there was strong segregation of women from men. The most remote, the most "private" rooms in castles were, she says, "women's quarters"⁶⁹. For both nuns and secular women, "space was used to construct and reinforce a gendering of women's bodies which emphasised chastity and purity"⁷⁰. She thus argues that the common categories of gender and class determined the segregation of both secular and monastic women, and that the ideology of chastity worked in the same way for both groups.

In response to this, I shall examine textual evidence which breaks down the model of absolute gender domains for men and women in noble households, before going on to consider spatial arrangements for women of lower orders. Unlike Gilchrist, I do not see the identities of secular women of any of the social groups as being focused solely on the

⁶⁵Giles of Rome felt that it was maidens who were potentially sexually voracious, and that it was men who needed to be protected from them, Orme, *Childhood to Chivalry*, p. 32.

⁶⁶The theoretical *locus classicus* for notions of space as employed in these disciplines is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus*, in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 72-95.

⁶⁷Roberta Gilchrist, "Medieval Bodies in the Material World: Gender, Stigma and the Body" in Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (eds.), *Framing Medieval Bodies* (Manchester, 1994), p. 43.

⁶⁸Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London, 1994); eadem, "Medieval Bodies".

⁶⁹Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, pp. 167-9, "Medieval Bodies", pp. 49-59.

⁷⁰Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, p. 169, and "Medieval Bodies", p. 57.

necessity for chastity. That was rather one element among many. The identity of secular noble women, for example, was not the same as the identity of nuns, and the spatial arrangements which reflected and constructed their identity were based around that complexity. It was desirable that maidens be chaste, but it was also desirable that they work, learn conduct appropriate to their class, and eventually marry. The spatial conditions of their lives allowed all these elements.

One need not look far in medieval didactic literature before one encounters exhortations to young women to remain secluded at home, and cautionary tales of the woes which befall maidens who wander:

Dyna, Jacobes dou3ter, that walkede out of her ynne to se women of the contre that sche wonede ynne, and was yrauesched and enforced and lost her maydenhode. Nyce maydenhode is ylyckened to Jeptes dou3ter, that walkede aboute in the monteynes twey monthes for to wepe her maydenhode. So doth nyce maydens that walketh aboute in medes and in fayre places ledynge daunces and syngynge, as it were shewynge hem self to lese her maydenhode, and makynge sorwe that they have ybe so long maydenes. ffor it byfalleth to maydenes to be in stillnesse and in cloos, as oure lady seynte Marie was whenne the angel come to hure and fonde hure in a pryvy chambre and nou3t stondynge ne walkynge by stretys⁷¹.

The story of the foolish maiden Dinah, and comparison with wise maidens who followed the example of the Our Lady in her virginal seclusion, was popular among homilists and moralising authors⁷². The tale's popularity was such that it is likely that it was not only told to, or read by, girls of literate or book owning circles, but also heard by girls in towns or villages in sermons told by their parish priests⁷³. Such a view of wise and foolish maidenhood should not, however, be read outside of its authorial context. The clerics who wrote and preached this view were influential, but their perspective on maidenhood was somewhat two-dimensional. The parents, guardians, employers or mistresses who had

⁷¹*Memoriale Credencium* from Ms Harl. 2398, fol. 39b, quoted in G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (2nd edition, Oxford, 1966), p. 119. Peter Biller notes that concerns about maidens walking in the streets or going to dances or other events are common in the pastoral manuals of both England and Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, "Marriage Patterns and Women's Lives", pp. 65-6.

⁷²The tale is also found in the *Gesta Romanorum*, for which see Sidney J.H. Herrtage (ed.), *The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, E.E.T.S. e.s. 33 (1879), p. 70, and in William Caxton (trans.), *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, ed. M.Y. Offord, E.E.T.S. s.s. 2 (1971), pp. 81-2. In the latter the author adjusts the tale a little, so that Jacob's daughter is said to have left her father's house out of a desire to see "the atoure or aray of the wymmen of another lande".

⁷³The relationship between the surviving homiletic or sermon literature and their role in preaching to the laity is not, however, possible to gauge with any exactness. See H.Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 8-9, 33-40.

authority over maidens at home or in service often shared the view that preservation of virginity was crucial to respectable young womanhood. But for them there were also other considerations, and these affected the spatial arrangements which guided the lives of maidens.

There is certainly evidence which indicates that the need to maintain chastity had some influence over the spatial arrangements of maidens in the nobility. It is indisputable that separate rooms or apartments for female heads of households, existed within very high status households at least. It was commonplace to build separate apartments for the queen's household in royal residences from the thirteenth century at least, and other royal women are known to have had apartments constructed for them⁷⁴. Within such apartments women almost certainly *slept* in all-female surroundings. Thus, when Anne and Katherine Bassett went to court in 1537 to be "interviewed", in effect, for places as maids-of-honour to Jane Seymour, Anne slept in Lady Sussex's chamber and Katherine in Lady Rutland's chamber - both ladies being ladies-in-waiting to the queen⁷⁵. Even the most prestigious bedrooms often contained more than one bed in medieval houses, and female servants would have shared chambers with their employers or other servants⁷⁶. Segregation of male and female sleeping quarters among the children of the household perhaps took place when one at least of the children reached puberty. In 1372 John of Gaunt's three children by Blanche of Lancaster - Philippa aged eleven or twelve, Elizabeth aged around eight and Henry aged about six - all shared a room. By 1375, when Philippa was about fifteen, Elizabeth eleven

⁷⁴Thomas Beaufort James, *The Palaces of Medieval England c. 1050-1550: Royalty, Nobility, The Episcopate and their Residences from Edward the Confessor to Henry VIII* (London, 1990); Gilchrist, "Medieval Bodies", pp. 51-3; Chris Given-Wilson, *The Royal Household and the King's Affinity: Service, Politics and Finance in England, 1360-1413* (New Haven, 1986), pp. 30-1; Anna Cheifetz, "Spiritual Mansions: Female Space and the Privatisation of Piety in Late Medieval England", unpublished MA dissertation, University of York, 1992, pp. 10, 15, 22-24. Cheifetz makes the very interesting suggestion that women's use of space was connected to their stage in the life cycle, and points out that a number of widows or vowesses set up their own all-female households. The examples of Cicely of York and Lady Margaret Beaufort may be exceptional in this regard, as they set up households on semi-monastic lines, but the subject of the dower house deserves further attention.

⁷⁵*Lisle Letters* 4, p.163.

⁷⁶Inventories sometimes indicate chambers with a large bed and other mattresses and pallets, which may have been used for servants to sleep on. See the inventory of the goods of Sir John Fastolf, which, in the entry for the "chambre next the somyr hall" lists one featherbed as well as one featherbed for a pallet, while among the items in the wardrobe were found five small featherbeds, suggesting their versatile use in various places within the house, *PL* 1, pp. 111-12. A 1476 inventory from the house of a parish gentleman in Salisbury lists "in the chamber" one hanging bed with curtains, and also one featherbed and one mattress, A.R. Myers (ed.), *English Historical Documents, 1327-1485* (London, 1969) p. 1153. A Stonor inventory of 1474 lists in the parlour chamber "a ffeddr Bedde...[and] a peyr of schetes, j peyr of blankettes, and a matres for þe truckle bedde yn þe same chambur", *SL & P* 1, p. 147.

and Henry nine, Henry was sharing a room with his tutor and officers of his chamber and wardrobe, and the two girls shared a chamber with Katherine Swynford - who was both their "mistress" and their father's⁷⁷. Such clear evidence of segregated bedchambers for men and women is not so easy to find for the ordinary nobility and the gentry. But it seems likely that noble and gentry girls in service most likely slept in rooms containing only other women. We should remember their high social status and thus their placement within the "high" end of the house, that is, the "solar end" which consisted of chambers for the elite members of the household⁷⁸. They did not doss down in the hall with the stable hands and pages⁷⁹.

There is also some evidence for segregation of men and women in private chapels or in church⁸⁰. The lady of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* attending chapel in her own "cumly closet" or pew, shared only with her gentlewomen, is an often-cited illustration of such a practice⁸¹. It may thus be valid to argue that space could be temporarily reserved for women - while sleeping or at worship - and that this temporary segregation provided protection for young girls. But it would be a mistake to move from evidence of segregated sleeping arrangements and separate worship to an overall conclusion of complete residential segregation. There are two important, but generally overlooked, details about medieval noble houses and household arrangement that must be taken into account before any conclusions can be drawn regarding the segregation of men and women. The first is that

⁷⁷Anthony Goodman, *John of Gaunt: The Exercise of Princely Power in Fourteenth Century Europe* (Harlow, 1992), p. 321.

⁷⁸In general terms, it may be stated that houses of the late medieval English nobility were divided into "high" status (or "solar") and "low" status (or "service") ends, with the hall between the two. In larger houses, especially by the fifteenth century, the solar and/or service ends could be extended into wings, so that the house formed an "H" plan. On the layouts of later medieval English houses see Margaret Wood, *The English Mediaeval House* (London, 1965), esp. pp. 55-6; R.C.H.M.E., *The House Within: Interpreting Medieval Houses in Kent*, (London, 1994), pp. 6-23; Michael Thompson, *The Medieval Hall: The Basis of Secular Domestic Life, 600-1600 AD* (Aldershot, 1995), chs. 6-9; H.M. Smyser, "The Domestic Background of *Troilus and Criseyde*" in *Speculum* 31 (1956), 297-315. I am very grateful to Martin Jones for his help with understanding medieval buildings, and to Jane Grenville who generously lent me draft chapters of her forthcoming book, *Medieval Housing* (Leicester, forthcoming 1997).

⁷⁹Chris Given-Wilson, *The Royal Household*, p. 60, provides a vivid picture of the household of Richard II - not the elegant courtly palace of the romance, but a rough and ready masculine place where servants and retainers slept wherever they could find space - in the hall, in passageways and vestibules, etc.

⁸⁰Margaret Aston, "Segregation in Church" in W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds.) *Women in the Church*, Studies in Church History 27 (Oxford, 1990).

⁸¹"Sir Gawain and Green Knight" in Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (eds.), *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter, 1987), lns. 934-42, p. 242.

most rooms had more than one function, and so the rooms that may have been reserved as women's sleeping quarters at night would often during the day be used for dining, social purposes, and even business purposes. The flexibility of space within a medieval noble house is reflected partly in its furnishings: the trestle tables, screens and curtains in the hall which could be set up or taken down according to the room's use at a particular time, ranging from dining room and sleeping area to manorial court⁸². The second, and extremely significant, detail, is that households headed by women were by no means all female in terms of staff. This is a point overlooked by those who would argue for complete segregation.

The household accounts and records of English queens including Joan of Navarre, Margaret of Anjou, Elizabeth Woodville and Elizabeth of York⁸³ record payments to male household members acting within the queen's quarters as chamberlains, ushers, yeomen, grooms and pages - that is as servants who attended to the bedding and robes, who lit fires and lights, cleaned out and replaced rushes, guarded doors and introduced guests, and who did general fetching and carrying. Male servants probably served the queen at table, whether in the hall or in the chamber⁸⁴. Moreover, the gentlewomen in the household were entitled to a certain number of servants of their own, both male and female⁸⁵. The accounts of non-royal noble women who had their own households, such as Alice de Bryene, Elizabeth Berkeley and Elizabeth de Burgh, also included such male officers who carried

⁸²Thompson, *Medieval Hall*, p. 152; For truckle beds and mattresses see n. 76 above. Even fireplaces could be portable - the 1476 inventory already mentioned lists within the chamber "I hearth of iron with wheels", *EHD*, p. 1153.

⁸³In A.R.Myers, *Crown, Household and Parliament in Fifteenth Century England* (London,1985) and Nicholas (ed.), *Privy Purse Expenses of Elizabeth of York*, passim.

⁸⁴I have not found firm evidence which suggests that very high status women were served by women at table. Royal ordinances suggest that such service was usually performed by men: "and she [the queen] to be served of her Chamberlain, and of the greatest estate, like as the King is served...And for the King's mother, to have a Baron to bear her spice-plate, and a banneret to bear her cup", "Articles Ordained by King Henry VII. For the Regulation of his Household. 31st Dec. 1494" in *Collection of Ordinances*, p.110. See also pp. 111-2, 121. Leo Rozmital, member of a Bohemian ambassadorial expedition, witnessed a banquet in the household of Edward IV, and watched as the queen was served in state in an elaborate ritual, observed by the king and other lords while her ladies stood around her. It is unclear from his description whether her ladies and maidens carried out the business of serving the queen at table themselves - Malcolm Letts (ed.), *The Travels of Leo Rozmital 1465-7*, Hakluyt Society ser. 2, vol. 108 (1955), p. 47.

In these, as in all examples I have found concerning the duties of the male and female servants of a lady, we are very much limited by the available material, which usually describes ceremonial occasions and is not necessarily a reflection of everyday practice.

⁸⁵See "The Ordinance of 1445" and "The Ordinance of 1478" in Myers (ed), *The Black Book* (Manchester, 1959), pp. 71-2, 225

out tasks within the lady's chambers, indicating that this was certainly not only a royal practice⁸⁶. Wills of gentry and aristocratic women also mention male servants⁸⁷. Male servants must have been coming and going within so-called "women's quarters" all day, and must thus have come into contact with the young damsels in service to the lady.

Male servants were needed by the lady because it appears that there were many tasks which female servants did not perform. The practical tasks of female servants among the high nobility are difficult to discern, but seem to have been mostly limited to acting as a queen's or lady's servants of the body - they would have dressed her and bathed her⁸⁸. Other important functions which they served were to provide an impressive and decorative retinue - especially at court⁸⁹ - and to provide companionship to the lady⁹⁰. Christine de Pizan's princess is imagined surrounded by luxury, with "ladies and maids-in-waiting at hand to run to her if she sighs ever so slightly, ready on bended knee to provide service or obey orders at her word". No more detail as to the nature of such servants' work is given other than that on a working day the princess will take up some handiwork, "and will gather her handmaidens and ladies to do the same"⁹¹. This picture cannot tell the whole story, however, and certainly seems unlikely for gentry girls in service. As married women they would lead busy lives requiring management skills connected with running the household, including a knowledge of account-keeping and the supervision of servants, and it seems most likely that before marriage gentry daughters would begin to acquire such skills either at home or in service⁹². It seems reasonable to assume this, although firm evidence does

⁸⁶Ward, *English Noblewomen*, p. 52.

⁸⁷Ward, *Women...Nobility and Gentry*, pp. 189, 225.

⁸⁸Among the instructions for the coronation of a queen, it is said that the night before the coronation she would be led by two knights to her chamber, "and there her ladies to change her anewe, and alter her as it pleaseth her best", "Articles Ordained...Henry VII" in *Collection of Ordinances*, p. 123.

⁸⁹See the approving comments by foreign visitors on the impression made by retinues of attractive court damsels, in Letts (ed.), *Travels of Leo Rozmital*, p. 47; Rawdon Brown (ed.), *Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII: Selection of Despatches Written by the Venetian Ambassador Sebastian Giustinian*, 2 vols. (London, 1854), vol. 1, pp. 79, 81.

⁹⁰In the late fifteenth century Katherine Chatterton wrote to her brother George Plumpton of her sister Isabell's loneliness, "hous such, hath nether woman nor maide with her, but herself alone", and begs him to find a "goodly yong woman" of twenty-four or more to go into Isabell's service, *PC*, p. xxxix.

⁹¹Christine de Pizan, "Treasury of City of Ladies", pp. 72, 96-7.

⁹²The "Rules of St Robert", c. 1241, include practical advice for noblewomen in charge of households. See D. Oschinsky (ed.), *Walter of Henley and other Treatises on Estate Management and Accounting* (Oxford, 1971). See also Rowena E. Archer, "How ladies...who live on their manors ought to manage their

not indicate whether it was the case.

A document from the household ordinances of Henry VII provides a clue to the usual division of male and female tasks in a royal household, and possibly within a household of the upper nobility as well, and at the same time it gives an example of complete segregation of men and women during a particular ritual. This 1494 ordinance for the procedure to be followed during the parturition of a queen describes an intensely feminine ritual, with the exclusion of all men from the room until after the birth

[When she is ready to go into labour, the queen is led by two of the greatest estate (presumably male) to the birth chamber and they leave.] Then all the ladies and gentlewomen to goe in with her; and after that noe man to come into the chamber where shée shall bee delivered, save women; and they to bee made all manner of officers, as buttlers, panter, sewers, kervers, cupbearers; and all manner of officers shall bring to them all manner of thinges to the great chamber doore, and the woemen officers for to receive it in the chamber⁹³.

An illustration from the late fifteenth-century Beauchamp pageant depicts just such a scene, in which the mother of Henry VI rests after the birth of her son, surrounded by three female attendants, while a fourth meets a male servant at the door [fig. 1]. The implication is that male servants would, in the normal run of things, have free access to the queen's chambers to carry out their offices. Another implication is that women servants, at this social level, would not perform such functions at any other time. If we are looking for examples of the segregation of secular noble men and women we will only find them, I believe, within such gender-marked rituals as this ritual of birth, as well as in sleeping arrangements and at worship⁹⁴.

households and estates": Women as Landholders and Administrators in the Later Middle Ages" in Goldberg (ed.), *Woman is a Worthy Wight*; Ward, *English Noblewomen*, ch. 6; Kirby, "Women in the P.C"; Hanson, "Paston Women on Marriage", pp. 460-66, 470, 474.

⁹³"Articles Ordained...Henry VII" in *Collection of Ordinances*, p. 125.

⁹⁴On birth as a ritual attended only by women see Beryl Rowland (ed.), *A Medieval Woman's Guide to Health: The First English Gynaecological Handbook* (Kent, Ohio, 1981), p. xv; Adrian Wilson, "The Ceremony of Childbirth in Early Modern England" in Valerie Fildes (ed.), *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England* (London, 1990), p. 85; Howarth, "Practice of Midwifery", pp. 11-12. B.I.H.R. CP. E 89 provides evidence concerning the birth of Alice de Rouclif, and that of her brother John, at which only women are mentioned as having been present. See depositions of Cecily de Shupton, Alice Porter, Beatrix Milner, Maud de Herthill, Anabella Pynder. In 1476 John Paston III wrote to his mother, Margaret, of the Duchess of Norfolk's desire to have Margaret present during her labour, *PL* 1, p. 602. Peter Biller's evidence from later medieval Europe suggests that in some dangerous cases a parish priest might be present, but generally it appears that only women attended: "Childbirth in the Middle Ages" in *History Today*, 36 (1986), 42-49, pp. 42-3. Monica Green, "Women's Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe" in *Signs* 14 (1989), 434-74 challenges the idea that "women's health was women's business" in medieval Europe, but

Evidence also exists to suggest mingling of men and women on social occasions. When a Dutch lord was entertained at the court of Edward IV in 1472, the queen and her guest sat at the highest table, along with the king, and an assortment of important lords and ladies including both the king's and queen's chamberlains and "diverse" ladies. The queen's gentlewomen dined in the outer chamber with the servants of the Dutch guest, with the gentlewomen lined up along one side of the long table and the male servants facing them along the other side⁹⁵. Such an arrangement suggests a high degree of social interaction between these male and female servants, with conversation and perhaps flirtation easy to achieve. This example indicates a difference between spatial ordering according to sex, and spatial segregation. Dancing was also a common event at such occasions, providing further opportunity for mingling and perhaps courtship⁹⁶. Evidence of mingling at a non-ceremonial occasion is apparent from the household ordinances of the fifth Earl of Northumberland, which order that the countess' gentlewoman and chamberers sit at the "Knights' board", that is, at the second highest table after the "Lord's board", alongside a gentleman usher, a yeoman usher, the chief clerk of the kitchen and the cofferer⁹⁷.

There is also evidence that maidservants sometimes married male servants of the household, suggesting the possibilities of interaction between men and women, or "courtly love" in practice. Some examples are evident within the household of Queen Margaret of Anjou, among whose damsels were Rose Merston, Katherine Whittingham, Agnes Parr, Jamona Sharnebourne and Edith Burgh, who respectively married a treasurer and jewel keeper of the king, an usher of the king's chamber, an esquire of the body and usher of the king's chamber, a man who is recorded as having done "good service to the king and queen", and a king's esquire⁹⁸. To cite a non-royal example, three of Elizabeth Berkeley's six gentlewomen were married to retainers of her husband⁹⁹, and it is possible that some of the marriages were made through meeting within the household. The opportunities for

she does not suggest that any but women were present at actual births.

⁹⁵"The Record of Bluemantle Pursuivant" ed. C.L. Kingsford, quoted in Myers (ed.), *EHD*, pp. 1176-7.

⁹⁶Leo Rozmital describes the dance following the banquet in Elizabeth Woodville's chambers, Letts (ed.), *Travels of Leo Rozmital*, p. 47; Orme, *Childhood to Chivalry*, pp. 170-4.

⁹⁷Percy (ed.), *Northumberland Household Book*, p. 301.

⁹⁸A.R. Myers, (ed.), "The Household of Queen Margaret of Anjou, 1452-3" in Myers (ed.), *Crown Household and Parliament*, p. 183, n. 2.

⁹⁹Ward *English Noblewomen*, p. 54.

social mingling between men and women sometimes resulted in scandal, as in an example recorded in *The Westminster Chronicle*. Elizabeth of Lancaster, John of Gaunt's second daughter, was seventeen and already betrothed in 1387 when she was introduced to the court to observe courtly behaviour and habits, and on sight of whom Sir John Holland fell vehemently in love. He, according to the chronicler, wooed her energetically day and night - suggesting he had plenty of contact with her - and finally she fell pregnant to him, and they had to hasten to marry¹⁰⁰. The clandestine romance and marriage of Margery Paston and her father's steward, Richard Calle, was probably enabled by the mingling of male and female members of this gentry household. Margery's mother's and brothers' outrage was not caused by the romance itself, but by the perceived waste of her marriage to a member of a social group which they were furiously trying to raise themselves above¹⁰¹.

The image of the damsel in the tower seems somewhat illusory in light of this evidence. It is not that maidens' use of space went entirely unregulated within noble households, rather that the interests and concerns of those who controlled that space went beyond considerations of the maintenance of chastity. This analysis is thus not meant to provide evidence for maiden's "autonomy" in regard to their use of space, but rather to introduce the idea that other motivations than the need to preserve a young woman's chastity were operating. Who was in control of noble maidens' use of space? What notions of the identity of young secular womanhood did they hold? How did spatial arrangements reflect and shape such ideas of maidens' identity?

We must assume that the household heads - the fathers, mothers, guardians or employers of noble maidens - were those with control over young women's use of space (though any figure with a degree of authority over a maiden - such as an older brother - may also have had some control). The idea of the identity of young secular womanhood which would have predominated amongst such figures was that of the young woman whose destiny was marriage, life as the female head of a household, and proper conduct according to the considerations of class. The spatial organisation of their lives would thus have reflected, and shaped, their identity as young women who needed to know how to conduct themselves in the company of men - in order to display their eligibility as future wives - and may also have enabled them to meet the men who could become future husbands. Such an identity could not easily be formed in seclusion from the world of men. Spatial

¹⁰⁰*The Westminster Chronicle*, p. 193.

¹⁰¹*PL* 1, pp. 341-4, 541; 2, pp. 498-500.

organisation would have also related to their identities as young women on the path to wifehood. It thus needed to make accessible the skills, knowledge, and feminine conduct necessary or proper to the noble wife. Again, seclusion would not aid the gaining of such skill and knowledge. Practical skills would have been more important in the experience of gentry maidens, learning to run a household, than for daughters of the upper aristocracy. For the latter, it would have been more important to observe the conduct, fashion, speech, airs and graces of their class, as was the case with Elizabeth of Lancaster. The spatial organisation which allocated certain areas within the house, or certain positions within the hall, to particular social groups would have reflected class organisation and abetted in its maintenance. Noble maidens, whether they lived at home or went into service in other households, were not supposed to act as autonomous agents, but rather in response to the needs and desires of their families and their class. Those needs included, but went beyond, the maintenance of chastity.

The question of the spatial organisation of gender relationships in towns and villages is one which warrants exploration, but I can do no more than touch upon these topics here. As the identities of town and village maidens were constructed along different lines from those of gentry or aristocratic maidens, the spatial reflection and construction of such identities was probably also different. One way to approach this question may be through the analysis of historical records which contain narratives illuminating individual lives. Legal records, such as the records of the consistory courts, common law courts, and coroners' rolls, often supply such narratives, and a detailed study of these would help fill in the picture of how space was used according to class and gender. I shall provide only a glimpse of those here.

Didactic works aimed at young women in towns exhorted them to remain indoors as much as possible, and not to gad about in the street, as will be discussed in Chapter Four. But an ideal of complete seclusion for such women would have been impractical, and besides, was not necessarily commensurate with ideas of the identity of women and class in towns. The chastity and respectability of servant girls, apprentices, and daughters living at home was indubitably a matter of concern, as is apparent from apprenticeship indentures, court records which tell of pre-marital sexual activity and damage of reputation, and didactic conduct texts¹⁰². Yet, as with noble maidens, there were other aspects to urban girls' identity than their chastity. To their masters, employers or parents they were also

¹⁰²See Chapter Four, below.

workers, contributors to the household economy, and, usually, women on the path to wifehood. The spatial arrangements by which their lives were organised relate to this multi-faceted identity.

One London cause from 1472 provides a picture of the tasks of an urban servant girl inside the house of her employer, a tailor:

[Deposition of Thomas Howden, tailor] As his servant he saw her continually in his house serving him and working for him on household things at his house in Candlewick Street from two o'clock in the afternoon until five o'clock...he says that from two o'clock until just before three, Rose was busy in the hall of the house washing clothes and from that time until five o'clock she was in the kitchen working on preparing food because of the feast the following day...The reason he was present there is because he is the head of the household...

[Deposition of William Taylbos, apprentice of Thomas Howden] From the hour of noon on that day to five o'clock, Rose stayed for the entire time inside the house of Thomas Howden...He knows this because he sat in the shop of that house openly, next to the street, for that whole time, where he could have seen Rose leaving the house if she were so disposed.¹⁰³

Servants and daughters are also seen in parlours and chambers, and only a thorough analysis of evidence would indicate whether there were "high" or "low" areas of the house from which they were excluded or to which they were restricted. Perhaps more relevant is the question of the degree to which young women were kept within the house. Thomas Howden, as "head of the household", seems to have seen it as his responsibility to observe the activities of his servant, and he presumably had a large degree of control over her movements. Yet William Taylbos' remark that Rose could have left the house "if she were so disposed" suggests a greater degree of agency on Rose's part. Moreover, it should be remembered that the testimony of these two is meant to prove that Rose did not leave the house at a particular time. A disinterested account of a servant woman's routine (if such a thing existed) might show regular coming and going from the house. Certainly, it does not seem likely that servant girls, apprentices or daughters were kept entirely within the house. Women in the church court records of London and York are observed with their sweethearts in taverns, meeting acquaintances in the street, carrying clothes to wash in the river, carrying water from the river to their employers' houses, and running errands¹⁰⁴. Elena Gubbe daughter of Ralph Gubbe, for example, drowned in London in 1324 while fetching

¹⁰³McSheffrey (ed. and trans.), *Love and Marriage*, pp. 62-4.

¹⁰⁴McSheffrey (ed. and trans.), *Love and Marriage*, pp. 45, 55, 58-9; Goldberg, unpublished translation of B.I.H.R. CP. E 159, deposition of Walter de Mellerby, B.I.H.R. CP. F 174, deposition of Joan Scharp.

water from the Thames¹⁰⁵.

The control of the movements of the numerically largest group of maidens in this discussion - those in the countryside - is difficult to judge. Barbara Hanawalt has argued on the basis of coroners' roll evidence that men's and women's work in peasant society fell into separate spheres. More women, she argues, died accidentally in or near the home, and more men died at some distance from the home in fields, forests, construction sites and so on. "The place of death, therefore, confirms women's chief sphere of work as the home and men's as the fields and forests"¹⁰⁶. This neat and attractive argument, with its appeal to the theory of "separate spheres" which has proved influential within feminist history¹⁰⁷, may have been misled by its source. Goldberg argues that what the coroners' rolls may indicate is not a separation of spheres but of tasks. Both men and women worked away from and around the home, but the tasks men performed away from home (carting, milling, construction, etc.) were more dangerous than those women performed away from home (reaping, weeding, milking etc.), while the tasks which women performed near the home (such as fetching water) were more dangerous than those performed by men¹⁰⁸. Young women of the low and middling peasantry were thus not necessarily confined to the home to any great degree.

Narrative documentary sources support this picture to an extent. In an incident recorded in the Bedfordshire coroners' rolls from 1274, Cecily, servant of John de Saltewells, and William son of William de Burtone climbed into a cart and went into a field together looking for sheaves of dredge. Cecily died when the cart turned over in a ditch and her neck was broken. William fled, and Cecily was found by a passing woman¹⁰⁹. This description is interesting, because it shows not only that a young woman's work was partly done in the fields, but that that she might perform that work alongside a man who was not obviously related to her. On an occasion in 1269 one Edith daughter of Thomas

¹⁰⁵Reginald R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of Coroners' Rolls of the City of London A.D. 1300-1378* (London, 1913), p. 100.

¹⁰⁶Hanawalt, *Ties that Bound*, p. 145.

¹⁰⁷A historiographical summary of the theory of "separate spheres" in feminist history is available in Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Women's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History" in *Journal of American History* 75 (1988), 9-39.

¹⁰⁸P.J.P. Goldberg, "The Public and The Private: Women in the Pre-Plague Economy" in Peter R. Coss and S.D. Lloyd (eds.), *Thirteenth Century England III* (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 75-8.

¹⁰⁹R.F. Hunnisett (ed.), *Bedfordshire Coroners' Rolls*, Bedfordshire Historical Society 41 (1961), p. 63.

the Fisher of Chellingham was going to convey two young men (described as "sons of") and three young women (all described as "daughters of") across the Ouse in a boat, when it sank, drowning some of the passengers¹¹⁰. Again, here we have a young woman working outdoors, and other young women out in the company of men to whom they were not obviously related. There are many other such entries which do not necessarily show young women in the company of other young men, but which further substantiate the picture of young rural women's outdoor work activities. For example, there is the example of Amice, the daughter of William of Lorimer, who went into a field to gather corn and died when she was struck by lightning (and whose body was found by another young woman), and of Isabel, daughter of John of Ravensden, who encountered the body of a dead man in a field¹¹¹.

Another narrative contained in the Bedfordshire coroners' rolls concerns Emma, daughter of Richard Toky, who went to gather wood¹¹². Her story could have proved attractive to those clerics who preached the foolishness of Dinah, as she was attacked by a man carrying a bow and sheaf of arrows, who "took hold of Emma and tried to throw her to the ground and deflower her". Unlike Dinah, however, Emma's father was not too far away, and on hearing her shouting ran to help her. Other legal narratives of rape provide evidence for the movement of village maidens beyond the toft, but it is possible that these sometimes borrow from the belief in the free-roaming woman as the loose woman. One Alice, who went into a wood seeking her mare to carry grain to the mill, was there attacked by a man who called her vile names, seized her and laid her beneath an oak tree, tied her hands together with the cord from his bow, and raped her¹¹³. In his defence, the alleged rapist claimed that Alice "has been a loose woman, in body and mind, for years", and that "it once came about that I fell in with her at such a town, at a market where we met, and in return for my giving her a penny she gave me her services on that occasion: and before, and afterwards, she rendered the same services to all men, and still does so to this day, openly and publicly"¹¹⁴. The raped woman - attacked in a public place rather than in the

¹¹⁰*Bedfordshire CR*, p. 50.

¹¹¹*Bedfordshire CR*, pp. 28, 2.

¹¹²*Bedfordshire CR*, p. 27.

¹¹³J.M. Kaye (ed.), *Placita Corone, or La Corone Pledee devant Justices*, Selden Society s.s. 4 (1966), p. 7.

¹¹⁴*Placita Corone*, pp. 7-9.

careful modesty of her home - is thus cast in the role of the whore. The lawyers constructing and the justice hearing the case may have been reminded of Dinah, who "for as long as she was in the hous with iacob her Fader, so long she was vnkaught, but when she yede forth, by Sechem she was ravished & filed"¹¹⁵. It must be significant that this particular case was recorded within a selection of precedents for procedure during appeals of felony¹¹⁶. The raped woman and the whore, one might suggest, were thus to some extent linked within legal discourse.

The fear that a maiden outside the home was less respectable than the maiden inside may have aided in the construction of the legal narrative concerning the rape of Joan in 1321, an eleven year old daughter of a London saddler, whose appeal states that she was in the street but "hard by" the house of her father, "three foot from that house", when the alleged rapist came and carried her off "with force and arms"¹¹⁷. The emphasis on her closeness to her father's house, to the point of stating her distance from the house, may have been borne out of a wish to emphasise the respectability of the raped girl. The interests, concerns and agendas which formulated the place of the woman in the law and literature of rape will be dealt with further in the next section.

This discussion has not meant to suggest a division between "theory" and "practice", between an ideological system surrounding maidenhood and real life. Rather, it has tried to show that "real life" conditions are as ideologically driven and defined as those which spring from the pens of clerical writers. Those clergymen were operating within a particular discourse of maidenhood when they bullied young girls into staying at home, in quiet seclusion. Their interests in young women were guided by their concerns for the maintenance of chastity in women, and form part of a far wider oppressive clerical tradition which aimed to keep women under control. Parents, employers, and masters and mistresses operated within discourses of maidenhood which were influenced by the vociferous clerical traditions, but which also incorporated their own interests and requirements. The spatial conditions under which maidens of different social groups lived were shaped by, and helped shape, the melange of such interests.

¹¹⁵Heritage (ed.), *Gesta Romanorum*, p. 70.

¹¹⁶*Placita Corone*, p. x.

¹¹⁷*Year Books* 26, pp. 87 8.

*Raptus: 'The Gret Oryble Dede'*¹¹⁸

The degree to which a young woman's movements and association were controlled may be seen as one form of control over her autonomy. However, codes of behaviour such as the requirement of chastity could be enforced through an education in certain ideals of femininity, as will be discussed in Chapter Four. Such a process of interiorisation of values could make physical coercion unnecessary. In turning to the subject of rape, we encounter violent physical coercion, and an extreme example of the violation of a woman's physical autonomy¹¹⁹. To what extent did late medieval English law and literature define rape as an offence against the physical and mental autonomy of a woman? Common law, in categorising rape among the felonies (and thus making it in theory punishable by life or limb), recognised that a rapist did a great wrong¹²⁰. But, in the case of the rape of maidens, did he wrong the girl whose maidenhead he "rafte"¹²¹, or was the wrong done to some other? The law offers differing opinions on this question, while descriptions of rape in literature tend towards the view that rape is a great pity for a father or husband, and a great shame for the woman. This discussion takes up this issue, which has been subject to debate among social, legal and literary historians, and offers a social explanation for the varying medieval opinions. The meaning of "rape" for a maiden of this culture varied according to her social status, and according to the interests and motivations of those close to her. The inconsistency of the messages regarding rape should not be seen as a problem to be resolved, but as a key to the real variations of meaning which the act could have, depending on the position of the maiden and the value of her virginity.

Medieval notions of rape are notoriously difficult to pin down, and numerous scholars have examined legal sources in an attempt to identify the primary concerns of laws

¹¹⁸PL 1, p. 70.

¹¹⁹There are a large number of feminist studies of rape. One which is particularly useful for its multidisciplinary approach is Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter (eds.), *Rape* (Oxford, 1986).

¹²⁰The felonies, as defined under common law were breaches of the king's peace which were so heinous they were considered unemendable, and the wrongdoer lost his or her life, lands, and personal goods. Crimes categorised as felonies included homicide, maiming ("mayhem"), arson, burglary, robbery, and rape. Baker, *English Legal History*, pp. 413, 429-35.

¹²¹"He saugh a mayde walkynge hym befor,/ Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,/ By verray force he rafte hire maydenhed", "Wife of Bath's Tale" lns. 886-8, p. 117.

of rape¹²². Much of the confusion about medieval rape comes down to the differences in definitions of rape and ravishment. Although on the surface it may seem that rape is a crime of forced sexual intercourse while ravishment is a crime of abduction which may or may not involve forced coition¹²³, such a clear distinction of terms does not exist in medieval law.

The apparent confusion arises largely from the interchangeability of the vocabulary used for the offences. The terms all derive from the Latin *rapere*, which in classical Latin primarily meant carrying off in haste, abduction or theft¹²⁴. *Rapere* gave rise to the popular Latin *rapire*, and hence the Old French *ravir*, which retains the primary meanings of movement or carrying off at speed. Alongside the development of the verb we see a similar development in the noun. *Raptus* in Roman law had been primarily a crime of theft or carrying off of a woman, with her husband, guardian or parents counted as victims of the crime, and forced coition not a necessary element of the offence¹²⁵. Justinian in the sixth century redefined *raptus* as a sexual crime, and by the time of the codification of canon law in and after the twelfth century, *raptus* had become a crime of both abduction and forced coition. Brundage claims that the canonists identified four constitutive elements of *raptus*: violence, abduction, coition, and the non-consent of the victim¹²⁶. Also in the twelfth century the noun *rap* appeared in French, with a specifically sexual meaning, and in the thirteenth century *ravisement* appeared, meaning the carrying off of a woman¹²⁷.

¹²²See John Marshall Carter, *Rape in Medieval England: An Historical and Sociological Study* (Lanham, 1985), ch. 4, though I feel that by ignoring the place of abduction in notions of rape Carter oversimplifies the issue. I also believe that his view that the statutes of 1275 and 1285 were primarily concerned with rape as illegal intercourse, pp. 36-37, is incorrect. For a detailed examination of these statutes see J.B. Post, "Ravishment of Women and the Statutes of Westminster" in J.H. Baker (ed.), *Legal Records and the Historian* (London, 1978) and idem, "Sir Thomas West and the Statute of Rapes, 1382" in *Bulletin of the Institute of Historic Research* 53 (1980), 24-30. See also Sue Sheridan Walker, "Punishing Convicted Ravishers: Statutory Strictures and Actual Practice in Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century England" in *Journal of Medieval History* 13 (1987), 237-50, p. 237. One of the most useful and interesting summaries of legal notions of rape is Christopher Cannon's "Raptus in the Champaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document Concerning the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer" in *Speculum* 68 (1993), 74-94.

¹²³A distinction which Carter, for one, endorses, *Rape in Medieval England*, p. 46, n. 1.

¹²⁴In this discussion I follow Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature* (Philadelphia, 1991), pp. 4-5.

¹²⁵James A. Brundage, "Rape and Seduction in the Medieval Canon Law" in Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage (eds.), *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church* (Buffalo, New York, 1982), p. 141.

¹²⁶Brundage, "Rape and Seduction", pp. 142-4.

¹²⁷Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, pp. 4-5.

By the fourteenth century, the confusion is less apparent in French terms than in Latin. In the language of the English common law courts, *un bref de ravissement* had abduction as its focus of concern, while *un appelle de rap* was clearly about rape in the sense of violent sexual assault (see below). However, as will be shown, the records of the cases used forms of *ravir* in describing incidents which were explicitly of sexual assault, and so no clear distinction between the terms may be claimed. The Latin was even less clear, with forms of *rapere* appearing in cases both of abduction and forced coition. Christopher Cannon, analysing the phrase "*de raptu meo*" in Cecily Chaumpaigne's 1380 release of her charges against Geoffrey Chaucer, argues that, in close rolls from the late fourteenth century at least, the crucial difference in meaning lies in the use of the noun - *raptus* - against that of the verb - *rapere*¹²⁸. Cannon himself notes the occurrence of *raptus* in some cases which seem primarily to be about abduction¹²⁹, and I have found many descriptions of abduction cases which use the term *raptus*, including one which one would think could not refer to sexual assault, even as one aspect of abduction, as the alleged "ravisher" is the girl's father, who claims that his daughter came to his house of her own free will¹³⁰.

While the terms are confused and conflated I must disagree with Maddern's assertion that there was a "total lack of distinction between the two crimes"¹³¹. There was a distinction, and medieval writers recognized it, though some may have been as confused by the language as modern historians¹³². But the chase after linguistic clarity cannot succeed in revealing that distinction. If we wish to find clear and separate notions of *raptus* as forced coition only, or as abduction which may have included forced coition, we will find it not in the vocabulary but in the identification of the individual who brought the charge of felony or trespass. With the former, until the late fourteenth century (see below) it was generally the victim of the rape who brought the appeal. With the latter, the writ was

¹²⁸Cannon, "*Raptus* in the Chaumpaigne Release", 74-94.

¹²⁹Cannon, "*Raptus* in the Chaumpaigne Release", pp. 87-88.

¹³⁰See Morris S. Arnold (ed.), *Select Cases of Trespass from the King's Courts, 1307-1399*, Selden Society 100 (1984), p. 80. The case is from 1316. See also pp. 73-93, for a number of cases of ravishment of daughters or wives in which the term *raptum* is used.

¹³¹Philippa C. Maddern, *Violence and Social Order: East Anglia 1422-1442* (Oxford, 1992), p. 100.

¹³²For example, the author of the *Mirror of Justices* finds it an "abuse" that rape is treated as a crime of forced intercourse with a woman in the courts, when "rape (*rap*) is strictly speaking the abduction of a woman with the intent to marry her", pp. 28-29.

brought by a third party - a parent, guardian or husband¹³³. In the Chaumpaigne case, the evidence that it was Chaumpaigne herself who brought the charges against Chaucer is better evidence to support the theory that he was indeed charged with rape as sexual assault, than that she uses the words *de raptu meo*. Had it been an abduction, a third party would have brought a writ.

English common law thus could certainly recognise a difference between rape in the sense of forced coition, and abduction. But this distinction was not important to everyone involved. Rather than searching for precision in the language used for the two crimes, it is more interesting to consider *why* the same terminology was used. Linguistically, rape and abduction shared an emphasis on something being taken away, stolen, carried off, literally *rapuit*. The real issue concerns *what* was being carried off, and *from whom*. The opinions of treatises, case law and statutes did not entirely agree on this point.

In *Glanvill* rape was a felony, one of only two whose appeal belonged to a woman, and was a crime of violation of a woman by force¹³⁴. Abduction formed no part of his discussion. The force and violence of the act imply that the woman's lack of consent was central to the definition. The loss of virginity does not seem a defining element, as he does not single out loss of maidenhood as an aspect of the crime. Thus in this formulation *what* was carried away was a woman's rights over her own body, and it was being carried off from the woman herself. Here rape was a crime against women, and any woman - maid, wife or widow - could be the victim.

Bracton's rape was also a felony, the appeal of which belonged to a woman. As in *Glanvill*, the felony of rape is treated quite separately from the trespass of abduction, which is dealt with in the section on wardship¹³⁵. But the question of *who* could be raped is much more complicated in his definition. His clearest statement is on the rape of virgins:

The rape of virgins (*raptus virginum*) is a crime imputed by a woman to the man by whom she says she has been forcibly ravished (*violenter oppressam*) against the king's peace. If he is convicted of this crime [this] punishment follows: the loss of his members, that there be member for member, for when a virgin is defiled she loses her member (*virgo cum corrumpitur membrum ammittit*) and therefore let her defiler be punished in the parts in which he offended. Let him thus lose his eyes which gave

¹³³This is a point which Cannon mentions briefly, but does not develop, p. 84.

¹³⁴"Raptus crimen est quod aliqua mulier imponit uiro quo proponit se a uiro ui oppressam in pace domini regis", *Glanvill*, p. 175.

¹³⁵*Glanvill*, p. 85, and Bracton 2, pp. 264-5.

him sight of the maiden's (*virginem*) beauty for which he coveted her.
And let him lose as well the testicles which excited his hot lust¹³⁶.

As in *Glanvill*, the wrong is done to the woman. In this passage the wrong done is a theft, the theft of a valuable member. Yet, Bracton goes on to say, rape is not a crime committable only against virgins. Other women may be rape victims, but the seriousness of this crime is not so great and therefore punished with less severity:

Punishment of this kind does not follow in the case of every woman, though she is forcibly ravished (*vi opprimatur*), but some other severe punishment does follow, according as she is married or a widow living a respectable life, a nun or a matron, a recognized concubine or a prostitute plying her trade...all of whom the king must protect for the preservation of the peace, though a like punishment will not be imposed for each¹³⁷.

Loss of maidenhead is therefore not an essential characteristic of rape, but it is the most serious form of rape, and the one to which Bracton devotes most of his attention¹³⁸. Richard Ireland has made the very interesting suggestion that Bracton singles out the rape of virgins because of the problem of proof in the wake of the abolition of the ordeal¹³⁹. He argues that a physical sign of innocence was still desired, and as it is possible to prove that an alleged victim is still a virgin (though it was not possible to prove that rape had occurred, if she were found not to be a virgin), then only the rape of a virgin could be disproved as a felony¹⁴⁰. Rape of non-virgins could not be disproved in this way. I am more inclined to see the greater seriousness with which Bracton regards the rape of virgins in a social light. The virginity of daughters, as shall be discussed in Chapter Five, was valuable family property. Its loss, especially within certain social groups, could be a matter of economic disadvantage. Rape for Bracton was thus primarily the violent carrying-off of the maidenhead of a virgin. It was still formulated as a crime against women, but that was

¹³⁶Bracton 2, pp. 414-5.

¹³⁷Bracton 2, p. 415.

¹³⁸On the punishment of accessories to rape, including those who lay with the raped woman after the original rape, Bracton states that they must be punished differently, "for to defile a virgin and to lie with one defiled are different things", Bracton 2, p. 417.

¹³⁹Richard Ireland, "Property and Proof: Issues in the Medieval Law of Rape", paper delivered to the Women and Gender Research Group, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, 21 February 1996; also personal communication, 18 January 1995.

¹⁴⁰Bracton 2, p. 416.

weakened by the emphasis on virginity.

What kinds of women did Bracton and the author of *Glanvill* have in mind, when presenting their ideas on rape? That is, from what social groups might they have expected women who made appeals of rape to come? Given the experience of case law of Bracton, at least, it seems most likely that they would have known that most women who brought rapists to court were of low social status¹⁴¹. The explanation offered for the social profile of these women is that rape was a crime for which the victim, or her family, sought compensation through money or marriage. Thus many, perhaps most, cases of rape never appeared before the court, as it was generally dealt with privately, and criminal action was carried out mostly by poor women as a last resort¹⁴². The tendency for allegations of rape in the courts to be associated with poor women should be kept in mind in turning to the next kind of evidence, cases of alleged rape before the royal courts.

In the courts, until 1382 at least, the distinction between abduction and rape was maintained by the principle that it was a third party who brought a writ of ravishment, and the alleged victim herself who brought the appeal of rape¹⁴³. In these cases rape, as in *Glanvill* and Bracton, is a crime against women. There is more than one concept of what is being carried off from the woman, however.

a) Rose, daughter of Nicholas le Savage, appeals John de Clifford of rape (*de raptu*) [she was taken against her will to his house, where he undressed her] and made her sleep with him (*concubire*) in the same bed...And moreover he held Rose's hands with his left hand and raped her virginity (*et rapuit ei virginitatem*) so that the aforesaid Rose departed all bloody (*sanguinolenta*) from the aforesaid John¹⁴⁴.

¹⁴¹Carter, *Rape in Medieval England*, pp. 54, 169; Ireland, "Property and Proof"; Cordelia Beattie, "Victims of the Legal System?: Women, Rape and the Law in Thirteenth Century England", essay submitted as part of the MA in Medieval Studies, December 1995. The woman's social status in such cases is evident when the occupation of her father is given, or when her's is given (e.g., servant), where no pledge is offered - suggesting she cannot afford one - and where it is explicitly stated that she is a "pauper". For examples see Goldberg (ed. and trans.), *Women in England*, pp. 252-3.

¹⁴²Ireland, "Property and Proof"; Beattie, "Victims".

¹⁴³Ruth Kittel says that in her study of rape cases entered on the thirteenth-century plea rolls all but a few were initiated by the woman herself, "Rape in Thirteenth-Century England: A Study of the Common-Law Courts" in D.Kelly Weisberg (ed.), *Women and the Law: A Social Historical Perspective*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), vol. 1, p. 102.

¹⁴⁴*King's Bench* 1, 1282, pp.101-2. This case is interesting also because it falls in the period between Westminster I and II, when rape was punished as a trespass (see below). In this case the defendor is (eventually) convicted by a jury, and is ordered to pay a fine of ten pounds to the king. Convictions in cases where rape is treated as a felony are very rare. See Kittel, "Rape in Thirteenth Century England", p. 110. She finds very few convictions of alleged rapists in the thirteenth century, and no instances of punishment by

b) A certain Alice appealed one John of rape (*de raap*)...and said that (he)...had ravished her of her virginity (*a force ly rauist soun pucelage*) against the peace etc¹⁴⁵.

c) Joan...appeals (Reymund) de L...of rape of her maidenhead (*de Rap de soun pucelage*)...[he took her by force to his room, laid her on her back on the ground, raised her clothes and with both his hands separated her legs] and with his right hand took his male organ of such and such a length and size and put it in the secret parts of this same Joan, and bruised her watershed and laid her open so that she was bleeding, and ravished her maidenhead (*et li debrusa le Watershad et la foci tout outre, et la fit senglante et ravit sa puselage*).

[The Record of the Case says he took her to his chamber] and there deflowered her (*la depucela*).

[The Record of the Case in King's Bench says] he utterly robbed her of her maidenhead (*et ipsam de virginitate sua penitus rapuit*)¹⁴⁶

d) Joan sued an appeal of rape (*un appel de rap*) against one E...[Her suit is rejected because it did not appeal in the required terms. The judge orders that she therefore go to prison for her bad count, but the plaintiff must still answer the suit of the king regarding the charge].

JUSTICE. You shall answer to the King for that you have ravished the maid Joan (*vous ravistes la pucelaye Jone*), who is thirty years of age and carries a child in her arms.

The woman was asked who was the father of the child, and she answered that E. was. It was said that this was a wonderful thing, for that a child could not be engendered without the consent of both parties; and so it was said that E. was guilty of naught¹⁴⁷.

e) Marina the wife of Gilbert of Talgarek had given security to prosecute an appeal against one Ralph Grace in the county court...The woman, being asked what sort was the appeal she had been minded to prosecute,

castration or mutilation. See also Carter *Rape in Medieval England*, chs. 6 and 7.

¹⁴⁵*Year Books* 5, 1313-14, p. 134. This case is notable, and rare, in that the accused is found guilty. However, he is spared the due punishment - that the plaintiff should tear out his eyes and cut off his testicles - when the plaintiff's counsel advise her to withdraw her appeal.

¹⁴⁶*Year Books* 26 i, 1321, pp. 87-92. It is said that Joan is only eleven years old at the time of the alleged rape. The accused is acquitted because of Joan's false appeal - in one account of the crime she named a certain day on which it took place, but in another account she named a different day. She would have been imprisoned for her false appeal, but is excused because she is under age. The detail in which the rape is described in this instance recalls Gravidal's insistence on the importance of reading legal documents as having "fictive elements". Some clerks give narrative shape to their depictions of the crimes, sometimes lingering over "erotic" details and violence. "The spectacle of violence against women is made tolerable as it is made literary", *Ravishing Maidens*, pp. 19-20, 134-40.

¹⁴⁷*Year Books* 5, 1313-14, p. 111. The idea that a woman could not conceive unless she gave her consent to intercourse is derived from Hippocratic and Galenic notions of reproduction, in which both a male and female seed are required to achieve conception, that is, both partners must experience orgasm. It seems that "pleasure" and "consent" are parallel or interdependent notions, at least in the mind of the judge here.

said that this R. against her will had ravished her (*encountre son gree lavoit ravy*) and had had carnal knowledge of her (*parieu*)¹⁴⁸.

f) [Hugh de Frenes, knight, and several other men, are accused of coming armed to Bolingbroke castle where Alice, Countess of Lincoln, was staying. They seized the Countess and rode away with her to the castle of Somerton] and raped her there against her will (*et ipsam ibidem rapuerunt contra voluntatem suam*) and in breach of the king's peace and in contravention of the statute provided thereon etc (Westminster II c.34)¹⁴⁹.

The notion of rape as a crime in which something is taken away is clear in examples a), b) and c). Here *rapere* or *ravir* is used as a transitive verb, and its direct object is the woman's maidenhead (*virginitatem, pucelage*). It is not so much the woman who is being raped, it is her virginity. This is something which she owns, and of which she can be deprived (*depucela*). Nothing, it is decided, has been taken from the woman of example d), however, as through conception - and through implication the pleasure she took in the act - she gave her consent. It is more difficult to define what is being carried off in the cases where the women are not virgins. In examples e) and f), the woman's non-consent seems crucial to the appeal - "*encountree son gree lavoit ravy*", "*et ipsam ibidem rapuerunt contra voluntatem suam*" - in contrast with the cases involving virgins where violence and loss of maidenhood are stressed. I suggest that in these cases there is an underlying notion of a woman's right to control the sexual aspect of her body (except, presumably, where her husband's rights overtook her own). What therefore is "raped" in the rape of a non-virginal woman is this control, or ownership, of her own body.

Thus in the theoretical treatises and in the cases brought to court, the distinction between rape and ravishment was kept intact during the thirteenth and into the fourteenth centuries. Rape was a crime against women, and by the act a raped woman was perceived to have had something taken from her - whether it were virginity or rights over her own body. But the process by which legal notions of rape developed within the statutes suggests a very different set of principles surrounding rape. In these, rape and ravishment came to be conflated (and thus have caused much confusion amongst modern scholars), and the status of the woman as the victim of the crime was gradually eroded. I would like to contend here that where the treatises and cases were shaped partly by consideration of the

¹⁴⁸*Year Books* 5, 1313-14, pp. 106-7.

¹⁴⁹*King's Bench* 5, 1336, pp. 90-91. Sir Hugh and his friends are found "in no way guilty".

class of women which they affected (i.e, mostly of low status background, cases such as f) above being exceptions to the rule), the statutes responded to the requirements of the knightly and higher ranks, which emphasised the role of daughters as conduits of property and wealth. For groups to whom a woman's body was part of family property, or certainly a generator of income, rape came to mean theft.

There are three key statutes in the development of rape law under English common law. They have been analysed in depth by John Post, and my analysis takes his interpretations as a point of departure¹⁵⁰. The first of these statutes, Westminster I, comes from 1275:

And the King prohibiteth that none do ravish (*ravie*), nor take away by force, any Maiden within Age, neither by her own consent nor without; nor any Wife or Maiden of full Age, nor any other Woman, against her Will; and if any do, at his Suit that will sue within Forty Days, the King shall do common right; and if none commence his Suit within Forty Days, the King shall sue; and such as be found culpable, shall have Two Years Imprisonment, and after shall fine at the King's Pleasure; and if they have not whereof they shall be punished by longer Imprisonment, according as the Trespass requireth¹⁵¹.

The most important detail of this statute is that it begins to confuse rape and ravishment by calling rape a trespass rather than a felony under common law, contrary to *Glanvill* and Bracton's definitions of rape as a felony, and thus punishable by life or member¹⁵². Here the punishment is reduced to fine and imprisonment. Also, rape as sexual assault and ravishment as abduction which may or may not include sexual assault seem to be referred to in the same breath, thus causing difficulties of distinguishing one from the other. But crucial to this statute is that it introduces the power of the Crown to intervene and initiate prosecution if no appeal was made by the woman within forty days. Thus while, at this stage, rape is still being defined as a crime against a woman, the introduction of a third party in the form of the king begins to take some of the control of proceedings out of the woman's hands.

The emphasis on age of consent also deserves comment¹⁵³. What is being carried off,

¹⁵⁰Post, "Ravishment of Women"; Post, "Sir Thomas West".

¹⁵¹*Statutes of the Realm* I, 29, ch. 13.

¹⁵²*Glanvill*, p. 175; Bracton 2, pp. 414-5.

¹⁵³Post, "Ravishment of Women", feels that the clause marking out ravishment of maidens under age may be "the first secular prohibition of coition with a minor", p. 150, n. 4.

"ravished", from women of full age is their right to control the fortunes of their own bodies. That is, the woman of full age retains some subjectivity, some identity as an agent, within the law. But in the case of the maiden under age what is being ravished is the maiden herself, and it is not so much freedom or rights over her own body that are being denied, but the rights of her parents or guardian over the fortunes of her body.

The second statute, Westminster II from 1285, returned rape to the category of a felony punishable by life or member:

...if a Man from henceforth do ravish a Woman, married, Maid, or other (*ravist femme, espouse, damoisele, ou autre femme desoremes*) where she did not consent, neither before nor after, he shall have Judgement of Life and of Member. And likewise where a Man ravisheth a Woman, married Lady, Damosel, or other, with Force, although she consent after, he shall have such Judgement as before is said, if he be attainted at the King's Suit, and there the King shall have the Suit¹⁵⁴.

The emphasis on full age has disappeared, and the focus is on consent alone. However, with the second clause, which dispenses with the wishes of the woman following the alleged rape, the woman's rights over her body are significantly diminished. Post and Walker have suggested that the statute suppressed women who had used the appeal of rape to secure marriage to a suitor who had not won the favour of her parents, as marriage was given under common law as an alternative to death or mutilation as a resolution to the appeal¹⁵⁵. "By thus discounting a woman's consent, the wishes of others - technically the Crown, but, by extension, family - were allowed to override her own"¹⁵⁶.

An occurrence of ravishment recorded by John Paston I may be read as support for the argument of Post and Walker, or it may be seen to modify their theory somewhat¹⁵⁷. It concerns the ravishment in 1452 of Jane Boys, daughter of Edmund Wychingham and widow of Robert Boys, from whom she had inherited his estates¹⁵⁸. Her alleged ravisher was Robert Lancasterother (Langstrother). John I, writing to Richard Southwell (previously married to Jane Boys' older sister Anne, who had presumably died by the time of the letter

¹⁵⁴*Statutes of the Realm* I, 87, ch. 34.

¹⁵⁵Walker, "Punishing Convicted Ravishers", pp. 237-8; Post, "Ravishment of Women", pp. 152-3, 158.

¹⁵⁶Post, "Ravishment of Women", p. 158.

¹⁵⁷*PL* 1, pp. 69-71.

¹⁵⁸Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century. The First Phase* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 142.

as references are made to marriage plans between Jane and Southwell), is anxious to prove that Jane was indeed "rauischid ageyn her wil, and not be her own assent", despite her statements before the lords (where her father was pursuing "ponyshing of the gret oryble dede") that she had married Langstrother of her own will. He provides a bill of "proofs" to that end:

On is that she, the tyme of her takyng whan she was set upon her hors. she revylid Lancasterother and callid him knave, and wept and kryid owte upon hym...

Item, whan she was bounde she callid vpon her modyre, wheche folwyd her as far as she myght on her feet, and whan the seid Jane sey she myght goo no ferther she kryid to her modyre and seid that what so ever fel of her she shuld neuer be weddyed to that knave, to deye for it.

Item, be the weye...and in all other places wher she myght see any people, she kryid owte vpon hym and lete people wete whos dowtyre she was and how she was raveshid a-yens her wyll, desyeryng the people to folwe her and reskew her.

Item, Lancasterotherys prest..., wheche shroff her, seid that she told hym in confession that she wold neuer be weddyd to hym to deye for it... [The remaining two proofs concern evidence of marriage negotiations between Jane and Richard Southwell].

If Jane Boys gave her free consent to the match, and if the abduction were a hoax which proved nothing other than that she was a very good actress, then this example gives good support to Post and Walker's argument. But if she genuinely resisted the ravishment, and later consented to the match only out of force or persuasion, then this example indicates that Westminster II may have done more than to prevent the elopement of consensual parties. It prevented the appeal of rape being used to secure legal marriages for those who wished to marry a woman (probably for economic reasons), but who had the consent neither of the woman nor of her family. The 1285 statute thus not only defended family interests in the marriages of their daughters where they were threatened by the wishes and actions of their daughters, but where they were in conflict with the desires of other individuals who hoped to get their hands on parts of the family estate. In this interpretation the autonomous actions and desires of the daughter are irrelevant.

The transformation of the law of rape by the statutes "into a law of elopement and abduction which inhibited the purposes of the woman herself"¹⁵⁹ was taken still further in the statute of 1382:

Against the Offenders and Ravishers of Ladies, and the Daughters of

¹⁵⁹Post, "Ravishment of Women", p. 25.

Noblemen, and other Women,...it is ordained and stablished, That wheresoever and whensoever such Ladies, Daughters, and other Women aforesaid be ravished, and after such Rape do consent to such Ravishers, that as well the Ravishers as they that be ravished, and every of them, be from henceforth disabled, and by the same Deed be unable to have or challenge all Inheritance, Dower, or Joint Feoffment after the Death of their Husbands and Ancestors;...and that the Husbands of such Women, if they have Husbands, or if they have no Husbands in Life, that then the Fathers or other next of their Blood, *have from henceforth the Suit to pursue, and may sue against the same Offenders and Ravishers in this Behalf, and to have them thereof convict of Life and Member, although the same Women after such Rape do consent to the said Ravishers*¹⁶⁰(italics mine).

This statute doubly takes the appeal of rape out of the hands of the raped woman. The clause allowing the husband, father, or other close blood relative of the woman to bring the appeal makes clear that here rape is perceived to be a crime against family rights over female members, more than a crime against a woman's rights over her own body. This statute sees rape law rewritten to become analogous to ravishment of ward, turning from being a crime against the body of a woman, of which she is the only perceived victim, to being a crime against the property rights of the male relatives with control over the body and property of the noblewoman. The denial of property rights to the raped woman who later married her rapist, reinforces family control in matters of marriage and alliance, and, though it cannot override the legally binding nature of the woman's consent, can see that she is punished for it.

This transformation of the law according to the statutes seems driven purely by the interests of the land-owning classes. The wording of the statute makes this clear - specifying ladies and daughters of noblewomen and only including other women as an afterthought. Post has researched the background to this statute, and finds it arises from a petition made by Sir Thomas West to John of Gaunt, asking for help in avenging the abduction of his daughter¹⁶¹. He finds that the ravisher of West's daughter, Nicholas Clifton, was an ineligible prospective son-in-law for West in terms of financial resources and family status, and thus not an advantageous match for his daughter¹⁶². The statute is produced by and for the nobility, and is illustrative of the status of the daughters of the nobility in

¹⁶⁰*Statutes of the Realm* II, 27, ch. 6.

¹⁶¹Post, "Sir Thomas West".

¹⁶²Post, "Sir Thomas West", pp. 27-29.

regard to their own fortunes. Where the young victims of rape had been referred to as *damoiseles* in earlier statutes, here they become merely *filiae*. Their identity is defined in relation to their fathers.

This statute should not be read solely as a response to the petition of an individual seeking justice, but within the wider climate in which statutes were formulated. Petitions to the crown generally, by the later fourteenth century, passed through the Commons, who by this time had taken on a powerfully influential role in law making¹⁶³. The gentry and minor aristocracy who made up the Commons were sometimes presented with petitions from individuals or groups lower down the social ladder¹⁶⁴, but in the case of Thomas West they were dealing with a request from one of their own. It should also be noted that while it was the legislators who needed to be persuaded of the validity of an argument to make a petition law, it was the practitioners of law - regional justices of the peace, or full time justices at Westminster - who needed to be persuaded of a law's validity in order for it to be used in practice. According to Baker, it is "anachronistic to regard medieval legislation as an authoritative text...A statute represented the terms of a decision upon a complaint or petition; a decision of the highest authority in the land, but not different in kind from decisions by inferior branches of the *Curia Regis*"¹⁶⁵. The 1382 Statute of Rapes was not, then, a ruling made on the basis of disinterested abstract legal principles, which would henceforth apply to any case of rape brought before any common law court, but a precedent which was set by a specific group of men with certain notions of the place of women within their families, and which had to be accepted by practising justices in order to affect individual rape cases¹⁶⁶. In a ravishment case from 1315 Justice Beresford indicated his empathy with a noble father: "if a man come with force and arms into my close and carries

¹⁶³Ronald Butt, *A History of Parliament: The Middle Ages* (London, 1989), ch. 5; Robert C. Palmer, *English Law in the Age of the Black Death, 1348-1381: A Transformation of Governance and Law* (Chapel Hill, 1993).

¹⁶⁴A.R. Myers, "Parliamentary Petitions in the Fifteenth Century" in *English Historical Review* 52 (1937), 385-404, 590-613, pp. 396-98, 596-97; Christian Liddy, "A Study of the Ancient Petitions from the City of York between the Reigns of Edward II and Richard II", unpublished MA dissertation, University of York, 1995, pp. 33-6, 49, n. 9;

¹⁶⁵Baker, *English Legal History*, p. 178.

¹⁶⁶An appeal of rape brought by a man in 1422 for the rape of his wife illustrates that the 1382 statute did not allow males to bring the appeal in all cases, but only where their appeal was made "according to the form of the statute", *Year Book I Henry VI*, pp. 1-4.

away my daughter and marries her against my will he does me a wrong"¹⁶⁷. The statute of rapes was developed by and for a group of men who regarded their daughters' chastity as their own property. In this group theft, not sexual violation, was the real crime. The outrage and active pursuit of justice of John Paston I in response to the ravishment of Jane Boys contrasts disturbingly with his son John II's jesting description of the rape of a gentlewoman and her daughter, and the attempted rape of a second daughter: "men sey fowle off hym, that he wolde ete the henne and alle her chekynnys"¹⁶⁸. It was, it seems, his greed rather than his deed which earned his bad name.

It was not only within the records of common law that the rape of virgins was a fit subject for expression. The subject also received attention from the producers of vernacular literature, some of them contemporaries of those who formulated the 1382 statute. It was a topic to which Chaucer returned a number of times in his works - in the "Wife of Bath's Tale" and "The Franklin's Tale" (c. 1392-5), and in his retellings of the rapes of Lucrece and Philomela in *The Legend of Good Women* (c. 1380-7)¹⁶⁹. Gower also produced a version of the story of Philomela, as an exemplum of "ravine" in Book V of the *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1386-93)¹⁷⁰. The rape of the princess in *Sir Degaré* from the Auchinleck Manuscript (c. 1340) provides an example of the topic within the romance genre¹⁷¹. These representations of rape may be read within the context of their production and, more particularly, readership, as expressions of the attitudes towards young women and rape which met with sympathy in their readers.

Rape is given no single treatment within these stories. The rape of a maiden by a knight of Arthur's court in the "Wife of Bath's Tale" is met with opprobrium by the fictional members of the court (886 - 912). In contrast, the violated maidens and matrons whose example Dorigen ponders in "The Franklin's Tale" choose death rather than the "trespass" of letting men take "foul delit" in their bodies (1364-1454). The only choice,

¹⁶⁷*Year Book* 19, p. 29.

¹⁶⁸*PL* 1, p. 512.

¹⁶⁹*The Canterbury Tales and The Legend of Good Women* in Benson (ed.), *Riverside Chaucer*.

¹⁷⁰John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck (New York, 1968). On Chaucer and Gower's approaches to the subject of rape see Carolyn Dinshaw, "Rivalry, Rape And Manhood: Gower and Chaucer" in R.F. Yeager (ed.), *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange* (Victoria B.C., 1991).

¹⁷¹*Sir Degaré* in Walter Hoyt French and Charles Brockway Hale (eds.), *Middle English Metrical Romances*, 2 vols. (New York, 1964), vol. 1.

Dorigen feels, is between death and dishonour:

But natheles, yet have I levere to lese
My lif than of my body to have a shame,
Or knowe myselven fals, or lese my name (1360-62).

It is an act of "parfit wyfhod" for a woman to keep her body for one's husband, even beyond his death, and to kill herself to ensure this (1422-1425). These feelings of shame, of being a tainted woman who brought dishonour to her husband, are shared by Lucrece. Following her violent rape by Tarquinius, Lucrece, already established as a model of wifely virtue, resolves to spare her husband the shame of "thys thing horryble":

Hir herte was so wyfly and so trewe.
She sayde that, for hir gylt ne for hir blame,
Hir husbonde shulde nat have the foule name,
That wolde she nat suffre by no wey (*LGW* 1843-46,
italics mine).

Chaucer's Philomela, however, does not see herself tainted by her rape by her sister's husband, Tereus. It is, rather, a deed which must be broadcast so that her violation may be avenged. The tale's narrator does not find her to be at fault either, despite his earlier account of Lucrece's shame. Rather, he warns women be to wary of men (*LGW* 2308-93). Chaucer's version of the rape of Philomela thus varies considerably from that of Gower, whose Philomela feels the need to hide, and is relieved when she is turned into a nightingale for then no one could see her shame:

"Ha, nou I am a brid,
Ha, nou mi face mai ben hid:
Thogh I have lost mi Maidenhede,
Schal noman se my chekes rede"
(*Conf. Aman.* 5985-5988).

The princess of *Sir Degaré* is filled with fear and sorrow following her rape by a fairy knight, worried (curiously) that people would see that she was pregnant and assume that the child was her father's, and worried also that her father would be struck with terrible sorrow, "For al his ioie is in me" (*Sir Degaré*, 165-71).

While these literary expressions of rape provide no consistent response to the crime, the dominant theme is the shame of the raped woman, and the sense of wrong done to her husband, or injury to her father. The "Wife of Bath's Tale", is a little different, in that the rapist is required to make amends for his crime. Even here, though, there is a sense that the rapist, in the end, goes unpunished, and indeed is rewarded with a beautiful and

obedient bride¹⁷². The most striking exception to this general picture is Chaucer's tale of Philomela, which must be placed within its context. One might debate forever the implications of the apparent feminine bias of *The Legend of Good Women*, and wonder whether it may have been meant and/or read as ironical or literal¹⁷³. Alastair Minnis is cautious enough to suggest that while there might be ironic or satiric elements in the poem, that does not mean that irony or satire is "the very taproot of the entire poem"¹⁷⁴. Perhaps it is enough to note the poem's apparently conscious inversion of cultural "norms", and hence that its blanket praise of women and condemnation of men was meant to be read with amusement¹⁷⁵. The notion of rape as solely a wrong done to women, and the moral that women should "be war of men" (2387), may thus be read as less than entirely serious. The context suggests, at least, that the notion of rape as a crime against women runs contrary to the readers' expectations.

Gower and Chaucer both worked within the context of the court and the king's affinity. The audiences for whom *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Legend of Good Women*, and *Confessio Amantis* were written may have differed slightly, yet from a wider perspective they can be seen to have had a good deal in common¹⁷⁶. Written for and circulated among members of the merchant class, gentry and aristocracy, they existed within a social context in which daughters were provided for, and thus in which the sexuality and marriages of those daughters belonged to their families. The context of the production and audience of *Sir Degaré*, a romance found only in the so-called Auchinleck Manuscript, is rather more

¹⁷²See Corinne J. Saunders, "Woman Displaced: Rape and Romance in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*" in James P. Carly and Felicity Riddy (eds.), *Arthurian Literature XIII* (Cambridge, 1995).

¹⁷³One feminist scholar who has wrestled with the implications of the poem for the idea of Chaucer as "woman's friend" is Elaine Tuttle Hanson, most recently in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, 1992).

¹⁷⁴A.J. Minnis, with V.J. Scattergood and J.J. Smith, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems* (Oxford, 1995), p. 441.

¹⁷⁵Minnis, *Shorter Poems*, pp. 440-1.

¹⁷⁶The initial audience for *The Canterbury Tales* was probably composed of the members of Chaucer's "circle" - that is, male members of the merchant or gentry classes who had achieved positions in royal service - while it is possible that *The Legend of Good Women* was, as the poet claims at the beginning of the poem, commissioned by the queen, and was therefore aimed at a more socially elite audience. See Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 41-6, 65-71. Gower, himself a member of the landed gentry, enjoyed Richard II's patronage and probably wrote *Confessio Amantis* at the king's instigation, Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, introduction, pp. xxx-xxxiii..

difficult to discern¹⁷⁷. But whether it were composed for a merchant audience, or for a higher-status one, the attitude towards daughters, sexual behaviour and marriage would have been very similar. For all of these groups a daughter's loss of virginity - whether through rape or through consensual sex - was a wrong done to her family. The raped daughter was thus complicit in this wrongdoing, and her appropriate response to the act was shame.

This brings us back to the point at which we began, with the discussion of notions of the self and autonomy. Richard Logan argues that shame is an emotion associated with group-oriented societies, in which notions of the self are inextricably bound up with notions of belonging to a group, while guilt is a feature of individualistic cultures, in which one's self is free standing and responsible unto itself. Thus

shame is one of the more 'public' of the emotions, involving having done something wrong which exposes one visibly to the disapproving eyes of others - 'being seen', but this time in a bad light. It also involves a feeling of sudden removal or isolation from one's group - of suddenly being nakedly visible, a kind of painful autonomy of 'standing out' as a vulnerably separated entity¹⁷⁸.

The raped girls of late medieval English literature, as with the raped *filiae* of the 1382 statute, were not conceived of primarily as autonomous individuals, who held personal rights which overrode the interests of all others. Rather, they were members of a closely bound economic and social group, a group with strong interests tied to their daughters' sexuality and chastity. The removal of that chastity thus rendered the daughters visible, isolated and vulnerable. No longer able to answer to the interests of the group, the girls could feel no more appropriate emotion than shame.

¹⁷⁷Derek Pearsall has located the manuscript within the context of the London merchant elite of the 1330s, while Peter Coss has preferred to see it as having an audience from the rural gentry. Felicity Riddy has agreed that its audience may have belonged to the merchant class, but adds the suggestion that the book may have belonged to a woman. See the summary in Carol M. Meale, "'Gode men/ Wiues maydnes and alle men': Romance and Its Audiences" in Carol M. Meale (ed.), *Readings in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 212.

¹⁷⁸Logan, "A Conception of the Self", pp. 263-4.

PART THREE: FEMININITY

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING FEMININITY IN A LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH CONTEXT

Notions of "autonomy" or "the self", as they applied to late medieval English maidens, had no fixed meaning or value. Rather, the constructions of young womanhood that were available were formed out of wider social needs, desires or demands. My discussion of concepts of maidenly autonomy and selfhood focused on familial and class constructions. The identities shaped for maidens, and the degrees of "autonomy" allowed them, were dependent upon the requirements of their family or household, and these were in turn dependent on class identities. In this section I argue that the versions of femininity available to young women were also shifting and unstable, and were products of particular social contexts and discourses. "Femininity" had no single, fixed meaning, but rather varied in definition according to who was speaking, and why they were speaking.

Defining medieval ideas of femininity, and trying to fix them to a set of characteristics, is something which feminist medievalists have often attempted. Gilchrist's argument that women's space was organised around the feminine ideal of chastity and purity falls into this school of thought. Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that medieval thought associated body, flesh and food with woman¹. Nancy F. Partner has demonstrated a fervent advocacy for the view that medieval women possessed identities which were innately theirs, rather than the construction of interested parties, and which were often at odds with the ideal identities which others dreamed up for them. Her article "No Sex, No Gender" provides a useful introduction to this discussion, both for its impassioned (yet not, ultimately, reasoned) rejection of poststructuralist theories of the culturally constituted self, and for the single-focused definition of femininity implicit in her discussion².

To support her argument for a notion of the self situated beyond discourses, beyond constructions, Partner cites the example of an apparently willful twelfth-century girl from *The Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*. This daughter of an Oxford burgess was already a married woman when she took a fancy to another young man, and ran off to live with him. Hugh

¹Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987). For a critique of Bynum on the grounds that she presents an "essentialist" view of medieval femininity see Kathleen Biddick, "Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible" Nancy F. Partner (ed.), *Studying Medieval Women* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), pp. from *Speculum* 68 (1993).

²Nancy F. Partner, "No Sex, No Gender" in Partner (ed.), *Studying Medieval Women*, pp. from *Speculum* 68 (1993).

of Lincoln tried to persuade her to return to her husband, but her mother intervened and encouraged her to stay with the second man. At a showdown in church St Hugh tried to reconcile the married couple, and threatened the girl that if she did not return to her husband she would be punished. The "wretched girl" was not impressed, and spat in the face of her husband, despite his nearness to the altar and the presence of the bishop. "Everyone was deeply shocked", the passage concludes. Partner analyses the passage thus:

And everyone should have been shocked! Nothing in the ruling systems of twelfth-century English gender, morality, marital and religious authority would seem to have constructed that willful young woman, who had apparently slipped loose from the whole epistemes of discursive processing. But there she *and* her mother are - rejecting husbands, choosing lovers, shrugging off the bishop, and spitting in church. The 'run but you can't hide' constructionist thesis has nothing at all to tell us about this incident, while cultural history with a depth psychology at its heart welcomes and recognizes a self-willed bourgeoisie who plainly understood that social disciplines emanate from sources exterior to *herself*, and that, with a little luck (and the support of a strong-willed mother), even women can have erotic projects of their own³.

Appealing as this interpretation is to a feminist historian, with its attractive construction of a female character whose strength of spirit is enough to allow her to flout the conventions of an oppressive patriarchy, Partner does not achieve the rejection of a constructionist notion of the self which she wishes for. The "run but you can't hide" thesis could, indeed, contribute much to an understanding of the incident. Partner assumes that twelfth century "ruling systems" construct a single notion of gender in regard to young women. Her argument implies that they construct a version of femininity which is obedient, passive and submissive to authority - in this case the authority of the church. Partner believes that the young woman's rejection of these gender traits in pursuit of an "erotic project" of her own is conclusive evidence of "self will", of the existence of a defiant individualism which is neither constructed nor controlled by "exterior" sources.

One does not have to look far, however, to find constructions of feminine gender in this period which would run contrary to Partner's argument. If we assume that the "ruling systems" she refers to are expressions of the authority of the Church, through clerical, theological or (as here) hagiographical discourses, then it seems absurd to maintain that there is no room in such discourses for representations of femininity which emphasise the disobedient, the active and insubordinate. Aelred of Rievaulx's story of the scandalous

³Partner, "No Sex, No Gender" in Partner (ed.), *Studying Medieval Women*, pp. 128-9.

young nun of Watton, who took a lover only to be found out by the other nuns, some of whom as punishment forced the young nun to castrate her lover with her own hands, is surely such an example of ungoverned, libidinous femininity⁴. Similarly, the disobedient, active and insubordinate woman finds a more positive representation in the *vita* of Christina of Markyate, whose defiance of her parents' attempts to force her to marry and fierce defence of her virginity were viewed by her medieval biographer as evidence of her holy spirit and dedication to the monastic life⁵.

How are we then to define femininity in a late medieval English context? If there is not a single set of characteristics that mark a character out as "feminine", then how can we recognise representations of femininity? What traits can we identify as those which medieval authors seem to regard as defining traits of womanhood? Here are a suggested few:

passivity, submissiveness, obedience, quietness, immobility, piety, beauty, chastity

But also

willfulness, insubordination, rebelliousness, talkativeness, mobility, worldliness, ugliness, licentiousness.

One conclusion which could be drawn from this is that femininity within medieval culture is defined in terms of opposites, or binaries. In other words, if any trait can be identified within a medieval context as an aspect of feminine identity, then its binary opposite must be equally feminine. The only difference is in whether the trait is judged to be positive or negative, ideal or non-ideal. This set of binaries may be laid against another set of binaries based on positive and negative traits in masculinity, e.g. dynamic/idle, authoritative/impotent, commanding/servile, etc. Such a conclusion helps us to recognise the inherent instability of Partner's argument. Moreover, an awareness of such binaries is apparent in texts which seek to construct versions of femininity. One clerical literary convention sets up cases "for" and "against" womanhood by setting up positive and

⁴See Giles Constable, "Aelred of Rievaulx and the Nun of Watton: An Episode in the Early History of the Gilbertine Order" in Derek Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women* (Oxford, 1978).

⁵*Life of Christina of Markyate*, ed. Talbot; Christopher J. Holdsworth, "Christina of Markyate" in Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women*.

negative feminine characteristics alongside one another. Thus we have intellectuals such as Marbod of Rennes describing on the one hand the *meretrix* and on the other the *matrona* to present a point of view which is simultaneously misogynist and defensive of womanhood, or Jehan le Fèvre who also argued the apparently opposing positions of disparaging women and praising them⁶. These are more than merely intellectual games. They disclose an attitude toward femininity with a contradiction at its heart. Marbod of Rennes' *meretrix* is as feminine as his *matrona*.

Unfortunately, though this notion of a binary within femininity prevents a purely monolithic reading of feminine gender constructs, it does not take us very much further, any more than a clear-cut binary between masculine and feminine does. We are still left with a single group of gender attributes, and have only added their opposites to make an overall picture. Furthermore, when tested against the discourse of scientific or medical writing, the binary theory proves inadequate to describe the constructions of femininity contained there. Scientific or medical discourses seem more conscious in their account of the differences between male and feminine, and the masculine and feminine, than most other medieval discourses, and for that reason it is worth spending a moment in examining some examples.

Within medieval scientific discourses there are a few "truths", derived from Aristotelian theories, which form the basis of this construction of gender. The chief biological difference between the sexes is that men possess greater "heat" than women⁷. This fundamental difference between the sexes, along with differences in humoural make-up (men are hot and dry, women are cold and wet⁸), produce *gender* characteristics of masculine and feminine. Joan Cadden eloquently summarises and analyses the relationship between scientific beliefs about sex difference and gender characteristics, showing how perceived biological "facts" influenced perceptions of gender differences in complexion,

⁶See selections from Marbod of Rennes *De Meretrix* and *De Matrona*, and Jehan le Fèvre's *The Lamentations of Matheolus* in Alcuin Blamires (ed.), *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 100-103, 228-232, 177-197.

⁷Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A.L. Peck (London, 1943), pp. 93-5, 103; Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* (*De usu partium*), ed. and trans. Margaret Tallmadge May, 2 vols. (Ithaca, New York, 1968), vol. 2, pp. 628, 630-1. For medieval accounts of the hot/cold distinction between male and female see Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 170-77.

⁸Brian Lawn (ed.), *The Prose Salemitan Questions Edited from a Bodleian Manuscript (Auct. F.3.10)* (London, 1979), pp. 42 and 222.

shape and disposition⁹: "The notion that women are soft and smooth and weak had to do with the inability of their bodies to produce semen and at the same time with a more general incapacity, with the sense that women do lead and should lead a more sedentary life, and with the idea that women lack the vehemence which men possess"¹⁰. An example of theories of physical make-up affecting gender capacities is available in Albertus Magnus's question of whether the male is more apt at learning good behaviour than the female. He suggests, in favour of this position, that because the female is more humid than the male, and it is the nature of humidity to receive an impression easily but retain it poorly, that the female is inconstant and always seeking new things and thus less apt to learn good behaviour than the male¹¹. Christine de Pizan seems to have been familiar with this line of argument, as she uses similar reasoning, though without the derogatory final phrase, in advocating the equal education of boys and girls: "just as women have more delicate bodies than men, weaker and less able to perform such tasks, so do they have minds that are freer and sharper whenever they apply themselves"¹².

I will focus on the arguments of Bartholomaeus Anglicus through the late fourteenth-century Middle English translation of his work by John Trevisa¹³. Bartholomaeus was an encyclopedist rather than a medical writer as such, but his work includes much which is derived from medical and scientific literature. Cadden remarks that Bartholomaeus "clearly saw a connection between male and female complexions and the economic, intellectual, social, and political roles of men and women"¹⁴, that is, between their biology and their gender. As the Middle English translation - completed in 1398-9 - survives in eight manuscripts and three printed fifteenth and sixteenth-century editions, it seems that this text had a particularly wide popularity and transmission in the English later middle ages. Bartholomaeus, however, said little that was new. His work is part of the broad medieval

⁹Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, pp. 167-188.

¹⁰Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, p. 172.

¹¹Albertus Magnus, *Quaestiones super De Animalibus*, ed. Ephram Filthaut, vol. 12 of *Opera Omnia*, ed. Bernhard Geyer (Münster, 1955), lib. 15, q. 11, p. 265.

¹²Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards, (New York, 1982), p. 63. Christine's book is known to have had an English readership, and at least three copies of it have been associated with women readers - see Carol M. Meale, "...alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, englich and frensch": Laywomen and their Books in Late Medieval England" in *Women and Literature*, pp. 134-5, 143.

¹³Bart. Ang., *De Prop. Rerum*, vol. 1, lib. 6, caps. 5-6, 12-13, pp. 300-2, 306-9.

¹⁴Cadden *Meanings of Sex Difference*, p. 184.

circulation of scientific ideas passed down from Aristotle and Galen and evolved by Isidore of Seville.

The male, says Bartholomaeus, "passiþ þe femel in parfite complexion...for in comparisoun to þe femel þe male is hoot and drie, and þe femel a3enward"¹⁵. From this physiological basis he builds a structure of opposing gender characteristics, which include the physical, the psychological, and touch upon the moral differences between masculinity and femininity. A woman's delicate beauty is a product of her humoural make-up of coolness and wetness. She has soft hair, a pliant body, a long neck, pale skin, a "glad, softe, bri3t, and pleasinge" face and appearance, and a small body which is wider from the navel to the knees¹⁶. In contrast, a man's heat and dryness endows him with his physical masculinity. His "synewes and brawn" are founded in the strength from which a man takes his name - *vir* -, his bones are "stronge, grete, and sadde in þe ioyntis", and his larger heart enables the circulation of a greater quantity of blood, thus making him more "boolde and hardy" than a woman¹⁷.

Emotional and psychological characteristics are also attributed to physical traits. A woman has a "li3t witte and hede" and is "merciable, and also enuyous, bittir, gileful, and able to lerne, and hasty in likinge of Venus" She is "more busy aboute norischinge and fedinge and kepinge of children", that is, has a strong nurturing impulse. In general, she is more prone to strong emotion than a man. She is "more mylde than a man [sche wepiþ sonner þan a man], and is more enuyuous and more louynge. And malice of soule is more in a womman þan in a man". "The female hath firye vertue, whereby she is vehemently moued to loue...and generally the female is more wrathfull then the male, and fighteth therefore soone against the male...the female is less steadfast and lesse true to her owne male"¹⁸. In all respects the male is the opposite: careful and wary, avoiding sorrow and peril, greater in wit, sharpness and understanding, more steadfast and stable. Moreover, his physical superiority (ie. greater perfection through heat) makes him closer than a woman to the "dignite and worthiness of þe ymage and likenes of God." For this reason "a man passiþ a womman in auctorite and my3t of souereinte. Auctorite of tecching and of

¹⁵*De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 12, p. 306.

¹⁶*De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 6, p. 302.

¹⁷*De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 12, p. 306.

¹⁸*De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 6, p. 302.

souereinte is igrauntid to man, and denied and iworned to womman"¹⁹. Thus biological theories lend validity to scripture, and reinforce the physical, emotional, intellectual and moral superiority of masculinity.

"Femininity" here is physical beauty and delicacy, intellectual and emotional impressionability, libidinousness, nurturing, instability, and lack of authority in teaching and ruling. That is, the definition of femininity offered here is not heavy-handedly judgemental or misogynist, as it combines both praiseworthy and censurable traits. Bartholomaeus does not set up an opposition between ideal and non-ideal femininity. Rather he adopts a relative disinterest, a "scientific objectivity" - that is, his statements are presented as "facts" rather than judgements. There is thus little room for the binary of ideal and non-ideal femininity within this scientific discourse. This slippery construction of femininity eludes easy categorisation as, unlike the anti- and pro-feminist debates by authors such as Marbod of Rennes, the author does not, in these chapters, have a simple polemical agenda.

But even Bartholomaeus, when he switches from a scientific to a socially didactic register, finds room for characterising women according to opposite traits:

no man is more wrecche noþir hath woo and sorwe þan he þat hath an
yuel wif, crieing, iangelinge, chidinge and skoldinge, drunkelew and
vnstedefast and contrarye to hym, costlew, stoute and gay, enuyous,
noyful, and lepinge ouer londes and contrayes, and mychinge, suspicious,
and wreþful²⁰.

A good wife, on the other hand, possesses these positive traits:

sche be busy and deuoute in goddes seruyse, meke and seruisable to here
housbonde, and faire spekinge and goodlich to here meyne; merciabile and
good to wrecchis þat bep nedey; esi and pesible to here nei3bores; redy,
ware, and wys in þinges þat schal be ivoided; ri3tful and pacient in
soffringe; besi [and] diligent in here doinge and dedis; man[er]liche in
clopinge; sobre in movinge, ware in spekinge, chast in lokinge; honest in
beringe; sad in goynge, schamfast among þe puple; meri and glad wiþ
here housbonde; and chast in priuete²¹.

In switching registers, from the more disinterested (though never of course completely objective) scientific, to the polemical social didacticism, Bartholomaeus's construction of femininity slips still further from easy identification. His construction contains neither one

¹⁹*De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 12, p. 307.

²⁰*De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 13, p. 309.

²¹*De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 13, p. 309.

single authorial agenda, nor one single account of feminine gender.

If medieval notions of feminine gender are not fixed to a single desirable ideal, as Partner suggests, and are not based around a dualistic binary of good and bad womanhood - a theory not born out by examination of scientific literature - then how can we come to an understanding of "femininity" as it applied to late medieval English maidens? How can we determine whether or not young unmarried women occupied a position of greater or lesser feminine perfection in comparison with women at other stages of their life cycle? How, without a notion of the building blocks of femininity, may we answer the question of whether maidenhood was a time in which young women were "learning femininity" or "being feminine"?

Some aspects of Judith Butler's arguments within *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* may act as a springboard into a different way of examining the problem²². Butler quotes Simone de Beauvoir's celebrated and influential phrase, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"²³. While Butler recognises that de Beauvoir's main aim, and very important contribution to feminist thought, was to distinguish between the sex that one is born with and the "woman" or "man" that one is made to be through the shaping of culture, she also finds problems with the logic of the phrase:

how can one become a woman if one wasn't a woman all along? And who is this "one" who does the becoming? Is there some human who becomes its gender at some point in time? Is it fair to assume that this human was not its gender before it became its gender? How does one "become" a gender?²⁴

Butler moves away from this conundrum into an exploration of Monique Wittig's claim that one is not born a woman because sex, as well as gender, is culturally constructed, and to her own argument that if one is always *becoming*, but never *being*, masculine or feminine, then gender is endlessly performative²⁵. But the questions she poses above are still valid for my discussion, and it is on these that I wish to focus. How does one at once *possess* and *acquire* gender? Are maidens feminine or do they learn femininity?

The solution lies in moving from a notion of gender as a fixed set of character traits

²²Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), pp. 111-2.

²³Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, p. 295.

²⁴Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 111.

²⁵Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 112-141.

or roles associated with a particular sex to a recognition of the tremendous variations in emphases and definitions of masculine and feminine. Different discourses have different interests in aspects of gender, and thus devise varying notions of ideal femininity. Thus, for example, within courtly literature the idealised and desirable lady is demanding and "cruel" in treatment of her aspiring lover, while in didactic texts, amongst others, mercy and compassion are the traits most fervently admired in a woman²⁶. The picture is often complicated because a number of discourses may overlap within any one text. Thus, for example, in the passages from Bartholomaeus Anglicus quoted above, the mixture of desirable and undesirable feminine qualities is not given a moral gloss in the passages that draw mostly on a scientific discourse, but become heavily moralized when he turns to a consideration of the qualities of a good and a bad wife. Yet an awareness of the agendas driving a particular discourse will help with an acceptance of a fractured and many-faceted account of gender in this period.

Recently a number of scholars have argued for the existence of a third gender, or of a half gender between masculine and feminine, to help us understand the identities of male and female celibates in the middle ages. Patricia Cullum has suggested that celibate male clerics occupied a gendered position half-way between masculine and feminine²⁷. Sarah Salih has argued that female virginity represented a third gender, while Robert Swanson has suggested that it was male celibacy which constituted a third gender²⁸. But is it necessary to seek for gendered identities beyond the masculine and feminine? A simpler solution would be to retain the two terms we have and to recognize that such terms are not simple or monolithic but complex and fluid and overlapping. That is, it is useful to take into account the analysis of discourses which is encouraged by poststructuralist theory. As Chris Weedon writes, in poststructuralism "the meaning of gender is both socially produced and variable between different forms of discourse". As examples she cites the representation

²⁶For a number of examples of the cruel and demanding mistress in Middle English literature see Chapter Four, below. The Knight of the Tower stated, on the contrary, that "a woman of here nature oughte to be more swete and pyteous/ than the man/ For the man oughte to be more hard and of more hyghe courage/ and therefore they that haue the herte nother meke nor pyteous maye be called mannysshe/ that is to saye/ that in them is to moche of the nature of men", Caxton (trans.), *Book of the Knight*, cap. 101, p. 135.

²⁷P.H. Cullum, "Clergy, Masculinity and Transgression" in Dawn Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in the Middle Ages* (London, forthcoming).

²⁸Sarah Salih, "The Performance of Virginity", paper delivered at the Gender and Medieval Studies Group conference, "Gender and Transgression in the Middle Ages", University of York, January 1996; Robert Swanson, "Angels Incarnate: The Problem of Being Male and Clerical in the Middle Ages", paper delivered at the conference "Images of Masculinity in the Middle Ages", I.H.R., April 1996.

of women within pornography and some advertising, in which female sexuality - moreover, a sexuality which is masochistic and entirely directed to the satisfaction of the male gaze - is paramount. Another dominant discourse of femininity within our culture is that of the asexual woman, in the form of the virgin or mother, which embodies another sort of masochistic feminine behaviour²⁹. Sexual or virginal - both are feminine. By employing a discursive approach to gender we could argue that male clerics or female virgins did not have a separate gender from their sexually active secular counterparts, but rather possessed forms of masculinity or femininity constructed by theological or monastic discourse. It is also important to remember that male clerics and female virgins possessed some important ideal gender traits which they shared with certain secular men and women. Thus, male clerics had authority and the virgin martyrs were highly beautiful and desirable to men³⁰. They were certainly masculine and feminine, though their construction leaves out active sexuality.

In the next two chapters I will argue that ideals of femininity affected medieval English maidens in two ways simultaneously. The first, more practical, ideal of femininity focused on the model of the perfect wife. This ideal affected maidens through the requirement that they learn to be eligible, and to show promise as desirable future spouses. Thus maidenhood was, in one sense, a time of learning femininity, and such femininity was expressed and taught through a number of different methods, from conduct literature, to secular literature, and social pressures. Femininity, in the sense of perfect eligibility, however, took different forms according to the social status of the maidens in question, and these will be compared.

In the final chapter I will present the argument that maidenhood, as well as being a time of learning femininity, was also a period of consummate femininity. Within some discourses, the combination of sexuality and chastity came to represent the most desirable stage of a woman's life. Thus, I argue, maidenhood was regarded, within certain discourses at least, as the perfect age of woman's life. The sexually mature virgin had a peculiar value, and I conclude by offering a hypothesis as to why the virginity of the young unmarried woman had such a powerful social and aesthetic value within late medieval English culture.

²⁹Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 22-3. See also pp. 98-106.

³⁰On this second point see Chapter Five, below.

CHAPTER FOUR

LEARNING FEMININITY

In late medieval England, as in our own century, one was not born a woman but learned to be one. Little girls of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did not simply grow into the kinds of women that their culture (or cultures) expected them to be, but rather learned the lessons of gender by which they were surrounded, and adopted them - or were supposed to adopt them - as elements of their identity. But learning femininity was only one aspect of socialisation or incorporation within culture. Learning the behavioural rules of the social rank of their birth, or of that to which they aspired, was at least as important as learning the rules of gender. Thus maidens were simultaneously gendered and socialised within a particular social group. The aim of this chapter is to examine the forms of femininity which were taught to maidens in different social groups and the manner by which such teaching occurred. Wifehood is the version of femininity focused on here, as that was the type of femininity emphasised in so many of the texts which prescribe models of feminine behaviour. Learning first to be eligible, and then to be a good wife, were key characteristics of maidenhood in the life cycle of women from across the social spectrum. However, the social group to which a woman belonged required a particular version of eligibility and wifehood from her.

In effect, this chapter is concerned with young women's education, but not in the limited sense of schooling or book learning¹. The literal meaning of *educare* is "to lead out", and thus in this context refers to the bringing up of children and young people, of leading them out of childhood and into adulthood. Our own often narrowly defined use of "education" to refer to formal learning in schools and universities should not blind us to its use in referring to much broader methods of socialisation of young people. Such a broad

¹The subject of girls' education is touched upon on p. 68 above. In addition to the works listed there, see Sara Lehrman, "The Education of Women in the Middle Ages" in Douglas Radcliffe-Umstead (ed.), *The Roles and Images of Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Pittsburg, 1975), and Joan M. Ferrante, "The Education of Women in the Middle Ages in Theory, Fact, and Fantasy" in Patricia H. Labalme (ed.), *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past* (New York, 1984), though these studies range widely across later medieval Europe rather than focusing in England in particular. The principle author dealing with medieval English education in the sense of schooling is Nicholas Orme, whose *Childhood to Chivalry* provides some account of the education of girls, as mentioned. His earlier works, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London, 1973), and *Education in the West of England, 1066-1548* (Exeter, 1976), mention girls only briefly, pp. 52-5 and 201, 204 respectively. For an excellent bibliographical summary of works dealing with women's education and literacy see Anne M. Dutton, "Women's Use of Religious Literature in Late Medieval England", unpublished DPhil thesis, University of York, 1995, pp. 24-45. The subject of women's education in medieval England, and indeed a careful rethinking of the notion of education as it applied to girls, has yet to be tackled at any length.

definition is particularly important in the case of medieval women, all of whom naturally received some sort of cultural education through a range of influences, but only a few of whom - mostly in the gentry and aristocracy - had formal lessons. Even for the latter the most significant part of their education was not book learning for its own sake but learning the character and behaviour proper to a noble maiden. It is because of my concern to keep definitions broad that this thesis does not contain separate chapters headed "Work" and "Education", as I do not see the two as necessarily distinct for medieval maidens. An institution such as service, for example, could encompass both activities. This broad definition of education necessitates the use of a wide range of sources. In examining aspects of the feminisation and socialisation of gentry girls I draw on letters from noble families, conduct literature², lyrics and romance literature, while for girls of lower status backgrounds I draw on deposition material from church courts, conduct literature, and literary representations.

Underlying much of the analysis is a sense of the power relations which operate in the formation of gender and class ideals, and this is derived from modern feminist concerns. The socialisation of young women - their cultural training in gender roles and characteristics - has been a central concern of feminist politics over the past fifty years, with authors of many of the most popular and highly influential texts, including Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, Susan Brownmiller and Naomi Wolf³, making it common practice among contemporary feminists to question *how* and *why* women are taught particular kinds of femininity. This popular theme goes hand in hand with academic feminist debates centred on the meanings of sex and gender, in the work of authors such as Joan Scott and Judith Butler⁴. Just as a critique of the cultural pressures on women today is a key element of current feminist practice, so is a critique of the feminisation of women a valid topic for a feminist historian. Thus I wish not only to

²I prefer the term "conduct literature" to the more usual "courtesy literature", as the latter properly refers to books of etiquette and behaviour aimed at a specifically gentle readership, often young men in service in noble households. In this chapter I deal with conduct literature aimed at girls from low urban status to the nobility, and thus "courtesy" seems too precise a term. See Jonathan Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge, 1985), pp. 7-18.

³de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*; Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London, 1963); Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London, 1970); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London, 1971); Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (London, 1984); Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London, 1990).

⁴Joan Scott, "Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis" in eadem, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), rp. from *American Historical Review* 91 (1986); Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

discuss what were the feminine traits which girls were encouraged to adopt, but also examine the question of power. Education, broadly speaking, is the influence of a dominant group upon the lives and belief systems of those being educated. When maidens learn to be feminine whose interests do they serve? Do they acquiesce, and if so why? Such issues will be examined at the end of this chapter.

Gender and Childhood

I noted above that my definition of education is to be led out of childhood and into adulthood. Is it possible to establish that through their education in femininity girls were led out of a relatively ungendered state in childhood to a fully gendered state in adulthood? Indubitably, medieval girls were conceptualised as "female". But were they "feminine"? They were certainly not the same kinds of females that girls above puberty were, just as girls above puberty were not the same kinds of females as married women were. I will briefly examine a small range of sources which illustrate the different versions of gender which operate before and after puberty.

Observance of the pronouns used in romance and other literature to refer to characters before and after puberty suggests some sort of gender distinction between pre- and post-pubertal states. There children are often referred to by the pronoun "it" rather than "he" or "she"⁵. The use of "it" to refer to a child was certainly not universal, but its far greater occurrence in reference to children rather than adults merits some analysis⁶. One particularly clear example occurs in *Lay le Freine*, a Middle English translation of Marie de France's lay⁷. The romance narrative follows Freine from her birth and abandonment, through her upbringing in a nunnery, and, following puberty, her love affair and marriage to a knight. Up to the age of twelve Freine's gender, expressed grammatically, is predominantly neuter. She is evidently a girl - she is one of "to maidenchilder" (87), she is a "maiden" (139) and a "maidenchild" (196, 214) - yet she is almost always referred to by the neuter pronoun. The poet calls Freine "it" twenty-three times between lines 134 and 236, that is, from soon after her birth until her twelfth birthday, while feminine pronouns are used only three times. However, after Freine passes her twelfth birthday, an event

⁵M.E.D., s.v. "hit".

⁶The M.E.D gives only one example of the latter, from *Havelok the Dane* ln. 2264.

⁷"Lai le Fresne" in Sands (ed.), *ME Verse Romances*. The lay survives only in the Auchinleck manuscript of c.1330-40.

which marks her acquisition of beauty, desirability and intellectual capacity, she is referred to exclusively by feminine pronouns. The switch is made very clear:

This Freine thrived from yer to yer.
 The abbesse nece men wend *it* were.
 The abbesse *hir* gan teche and beld.
 Bi that *hie* was of twelve winter eld
 In al Ingland ther nas non
 A fairer maiden than *hie* was on.
 And when *hie* couthe ought of manhed,
Hie bad the abbesses *hir* wis and rede
 Which were *hir* kin (235-243, italics added)

It would be too strong to say that the use of the neuter pronoun renders these child characters ungendered in an absolute sense. But perhaps it hints at a different kind of gender identity possessed by children before they reach the ages of reason or consent. Historical sources also provide examples. Commentators on medieval education have noted the practice among noble families of educating male and female children together, either under the tutelage of their mother or a governess or nurse, until around the age of seven when male children were often removed from this feminine atmosphere to go to school or learn with a tutor⁸. The literary example of Floris and Blancheflour - a boy and girl who are extremely close in their infancy and who, on reaching the age of seven, are distraught when Floris's father decides that his son should go to school - is certainly grounded in the noble practice of the day⁹. Eileen Power, writing about the education of male and female children in nunneries, notes that in general boys were not supposed to remain in the nunnery past the age of nine or ten. A Cistercian statute of 1256-7 and ordinances of specific houses forbade the presence of boys in nunneries altogether¹⁰, but the lax application of the rule implies that boys under ten did not pose a sufficiently masculine threat to the enclosed world of the nunnery. We saw in Chapter Three how the children of John of Gaunt shared a bedroom during childhood, but that the daughters and son were

⁸Orme, *Childhood to Chivalry*, pp. 7, 17-18. Orme argues that as a number of princes had exclusively male tuition from a younger age - ranging from birth to five - that the "division between a female-dominated infancy and a male-ruled childhood must often have been apparent rather than real" p. 18. This may be so, but perhaps it is more likely that the exceptional social circumstances of the boys in question - they are all sons or grandsons of kings - created exceptional educational circumstances.

⁹"Floris and Blancheflour" in Sands (ed), *ME Verse Romances*, lns. 1-24, pp. 282-3.

¹⁰Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, p. 263.

separated after the eldest daughter achieved puberty¹¹.

At the other end of the social spectrum, it is possible to use material from coroners' rolls to gain some idea of the gender identities of young children in the peasantry or lower urban society. Analysis of "first finders" evidence - that is, of the identities of the individuals named as the first finders of the bodies of persons who have died in accidental or suspicious circumstances - indicates a difference between the gendered identities of boys and girls. It suggests that boys were associated in part with the "masculine" world of male dominated tasks while keeping a strong degree of contact with the "feminine" world of their mothers, while girls were involved within the feminine world right through their childhoods¹². My proportions are drawn from the published Bedfordshire rolls¹³. I have found that in recorded deaths of boys up to the age of twelve, of a sample of 21, 7 (33%) were found by their mothers, 9 (43%) by their fathers, 4 (19%) by some other (in two cases by a sister) and in 1 instance the finder is unrecorded. But for girls, of a sample of 15, 9 (60%) were found by their mothers, *none* at all by their fathers, 1(7%) by another (a woman) and 5 (33%) have their finders unrecorded. The sample here is small, but a chi-squared test indicates that the findings are statistically significant despite the size of the sample¹⁴. Hanawalt also provides some percentages from first finder material, and in her sample 43% of boys were found by their mothers, 45% by their fathers, 5% by siblings and 7% by other kin, while 59% of girls were found by their mothers, and 33% by their fathers¹⁵. She includes these figures as evidence for affective relationships between parents and children¹⁶, but I feel it is possible that they may tell us something broader about the gender identities of children. Little boys occupied a gender identity during childhood which was not fixed absolutely to either the femininity of adult women or the masculinity of adult men, but rather a masculinity which was strongly affected by their identity as children.

¹¹Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, p. 321.

¹²Though, note from Chapter Three above, that I do not endorse a model of a strong spatial division of the masculine and feminine worlds, rather some division of tasks and identities. I avoid the terms masculine or feminine "spheres" here, as they are too easily understood in strictly spatial terms.

¹³*Bedfordshire CR*.

¹⁴That is, there are less than five chances in a hundred of this result occurring by chance if there were no relationship between finder and sex (if the sample is random). I am grateful to B.R. Phillips for his help with the statistics.

¹⁵Hanawalt, *Ties that Bound*, p. 184.

¹⁶Hanawalt, *Ties that Bound*, p. 185.

Little girls however, were perhaps conceived of as "little women", as feminine, from an early age. The process of becoming masculine, therefore, was perhaps a rather more complicated process for male children than the process of becoming feminine was for girls.

It may not be particularly useful to argue that people "acquired" or were "endowed with" gender at a particular stage in their life cycle. It is more useful to see that gender took on different meanings at different stages of the life cycle. Also, at the same time that boys and girls possessed certain gender identities, they were learning new ones. Girls were at once *being* maidens and *becoming* women. An important part of maidenhood as a life cycle stage was learning to be eligible for marriage, and to then be a good wife. In didactic or educational treatises aimed at controlling the behaviour of young women wifhood looms like an inescapable fate¹⁷. "Douttir, 3if þou wilt ben a wif" begins *The Good Wife Taught her Daughter*¹⁸. Many of the *exempla* of *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* feature married women, and the constant assumption is that the noble girls at whom the text is purportedly directed will marry. Wifhood is the assumed fate of maidens in *The Thewis off Gud Women*, and it is seen to be a disaster when marriage does not happen in time and pregnancy precedes it¹⁹. Maidenhood may be a theological or mystical ideal - the "perfect age of woman", as I argue in the final chapter - but in practical terms it was most important that maidens learn the femininity appropriate to wifhood. It is the nature of this education, and the process by which it was achieved and to whose ends, that will be examined here.

¹⁷The exception is *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage*, which makes spinsterhood a viable option for young women, Mustanoja (ed.), *Good Wife etc.*, lns. 67-72, p. 175.

¹⁸"Þe Gode Wif Tauhte Hire Douster Fele Sithe and Ofte" in Mustanoja (ed.), *Good Wife etc.*, E version, ln. 1, p. 158. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from the E version.

¹⁹"The Thewis off Gud Women" in R. Girvan (ed.), *Ratis Raving and other Early Scots Poems on Morals*, Scottish Text Society, ser. 3, vol. 2 (1937), lns. 265-282. The *Thewis* text is also preserved in another manuscript, where it is named *Documenta Matris ad Filiam*, also edited in Girvan and differing in a few places from the former. In general my quotations are taken from the *Thewis*, except where I cite passages from the *Documenta* which do not appear in the former. Both are also edited in the Mustanoja collection, but the Girvan edition has been preferred as it includes other works from the *Thewis* manuscript.

*'Goodly Young Women' of the Wealthy Classes*²⁰

Maidenhood formed a distinct phase in women's life cycles, but it was seen as a transitional stage. It was shaped largely by the concerns of its conclusion - marriage and motherhood. That is, maidenhood as a real-life phase - rather than a mystical ideal - was dominated by the concerns of those who wanted to see girls find a husband. Usually, these were the concerns of parents or guardians. A letter from John Paston I to Margaret Paston and his servants John Daubeney and Richard Calle, expressing disappointment over the prodigal behaviour of his son John II, indicates the extent to which parents, perhaps particularly in an aspirant family such as the Pastons, relied on their children to maintain or improve the standing of a family socially:

Euery pore man þat hath browt vp his chylder to the age of xij yer waytyth than to be holp and profitid be his childer, and euery gentilman that hath discrecion waytith that his ken and seruantes þat levith be hym and at his coste shulde help hym forthward²¹.

In the case of daughters, that help most likely took the form of a financially and socially advantageous marriage. Within gentry culture, where family identity was of paramount importance, a good marriage was seen as a benefit not just to a gentry daughter or son for their own sake, but for the sake of the whole clan. It seems quite ironic that one of the addressees of the letter, Richard Calle, should be seen as the agent of social catastrophe by the family when he and Margaret's eldest daughter Margery married in 1469. Margaret's account of Margery's examination by the bishop, to inquire into the canonical validity of the marriage, includes the bishop's remonstrations with Margery to remember "how sche was born, [and] wat kyn and frenddys þat sche had" and the "rebuke and schame and los" it would be to her to disobey her family. However, it seems that Margaret was more concerned about the shame and rebuke which would come to the family as a whole. If she had really had Margery's interests at heart she could hardly have refused her daughter entry to the family home, nor have written to her son not to be sad for "we haue lost of here but a brethele"²².

The fifteenth-century letter collections of gentry or upper merchant families provide a particularly clear insight into the kinds of femininity and masculinity which were sought

²⁰"Wealthy classes" is the term used here to encompass landed gentry and elite merchants.

²¹*PL* 1, p. 132 (1465).

²²*PL* 1, pp. 341-344 (1469).

in future wives and husbands, and which therefore were cultivated in young women and men:

I wolde be as gladde as any man, and ame better content now þat he sholde have hyre than any other þat euyre he was heretoffoore abowte to have hadde - concyderyd hyre persone, hyre yowthe, and the stok þat she is comyn offe, þe love on bothe sydes, þe tendre fauore þat she is in wyth hyre fadre and moodre, the kyndenesse off hyre fadre and moodre to hyre in departyng wyth hyre, the favore and goode conceyte þat they have in my brothere, the worshypfull and vertuuous dysposicion off hire fadre and moodre, whyche prenostikyth þat of lyklichod the mayde sholde be vertuuous and goode²³.

Whe thaulkyd togydyr in hour bed of Dewltonys syster and 3e ferryd the condyscyons of father and brethryn byt 3e neyd not I saw hyr and sche whos at brekefaste with hyr mother and us sche ys as goodly a 3eunge whomane as faeyr as whelbodyd and as sad as I se hany thys vij 3eyr and a good haythe. I pray God that hyt may be inpryntyd in yur mynd to sette yowr harte ther Syr²⁴.

[Randolph Manwring, potential husband for Ellynor Plumpton, is] reasonable in alle causes. For first he wilbe contented to make hir xx marke joynter; and as for such essew as God sendeth them, it is noe doubt but he wyll so provyd for them, that they shall live like gentlemen or gentlewomen, whichsoever God suffereth. And veryly, father, I am right sure that my sister Ellynor had rather have hym, you beyng so content, then a man of far greater lands²⁵.

It is easy to assume that young men and women of the gentry and upper merchant classes would have had no trouble in finding spouses. After all, were they not wealthy? But a reading of the letter collections of the Paston, Stonor, Plumpton and Cely families of the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries indicates how lengthy and complicated the process could be. Often the problem was with finding a match that the families deemed suitable in terms of wealth, condition and personal qualities. At other times, there seems to have been anxiety about whether a match could be found at all. Agnes Paston had evidently despaired of finding a match for her twenty-nine year old daughter Elizabeth, when she wrote that Elizabeth must work for her living²⁶. And in 1465 John Paston III

²³PL 1, p. 500, John Paston II to Margaret Paston (1477).

²⁴CP, p. 59, Richard Cely the younger to George Cely (1481).

²⁵PC , p. 193, German Pole to Sir Robert Plumpton (1504).

²⁶PL 1, p. 42, Agnes Paston's memorandum of "errands"(1458).

wrote to his mother in London, saying "I pray yow vysyt þe Rood of Northedor, and Seynt Sauyour at Barmonsey amonge whyll ye be abyd in London, and let my sustyr Margery goo wyth yow to prey to them þat sche may haue a good hosbond or sche com hom ayen"²⁷.

Men and women of the aristocracy may have had fewer problems in finding appropriate matches. Rosenthal's study of marriage patterns within the peerage from 1350-1500 shows that nearly all the peers married - many two or more times - so it seems likely that most women of this social level found husbands with little difficulty²⁸. Even within the gentry and merchant elite, it may have been that families were more concerned about whether the marriages they secured for their children were constructive in terms of their social aspirations, than about whether their children would marry at all. Christine Carpenter has recently written that "because of the survival of so many letters from the gentry, along with so much other material that can be used for their study, we are potentially in the position to get inside their skins much more successfully than we can do with the nobility"²⁹. Even if we cannot get within the skin of the gentry, we can suggest that the abundance of records left behind by aspirant groups indicates consciousness of social status, and attempts to store the fragments of their daily lives to provide material evidence of their lineage³⁰. The conduct literature for young women, discussion of which will form part of this chapter, is another source which tells us more about aspirants than the social elite. As a result, this section is an analysis of constructions of gender within the gentry and

²⁷PL 1, p. 529, John Paston III to Margaret Paston (1465).

²⁸Rosenthal, "Aristocratic Marriage", 181-94. Hollingsworth's study of age at marriage among ducal families indicates a small number of duke's daughters who had not married by thirty, "British Ducal Families", p. 364, table 17. If some of these daughters did remain unmarried it is possible that they entered nunneries. Marilyn Oliva's study of office holders in eleven nunneries in the diocese of Norwich from 1350 to 1540 indicates, however, that only 1% of the nuns came from the titled aristocracy. Most came from the middling wealthy ranks of parish gentry (64%), with smaller numbers from urban society (16%), the upper gentry (15%) and the yeoman rank (4%). See her "Aristocracy or Meritocracy? Office-Holding Patterns in Late Medieval English Nunneries" in W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds.), *Women in the Church*, Studies in Church History 27 (Oxford, 1990), pp. 199-203. There is a small possibility, that some aristocratic daughters remained spinsters in secular life, perhaps within service or finding places in the households of other family members.

²⁹Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford's SL & P*, introduction, p. 31.

³⁰Philip Morgan has argued that the gentry, and to a lesser extent the urban elite, worked at constructing the histories of their families through the written record, standing structures, decoration and burial practices. The preservation of the gentry and merchant letter collections perhaps formed part of this programme. "The Lordship of the Past in the Middle Ages", paper delivered at the "Consuming the Past" conference, University of York, November 1996.

merchant elite rather than the aristocracy.

A comparison of masculine and feminine eligibility, as revealed in the letters, is a useful way to discern what were the most desirable traits for a young woman to acquire and display. Of course, personal and character traits were by no means the only factor in the choice of a gentry bride or bridegroom, but it is significant that attention is drawn to gender characteristics. Keith Dockray asked "Why did Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry?", and in his analysis of the Plumpton, Stonor and Paston letters argued that while business and dynastic concerns played a role in the choice of bride or groom, love and personal considerations were also very influential³¹. Here I wish to extend his analysis in a number of ways. First, to make a statistically-based comparison of the desirable and undesirable traits listed in the Paston, Stonor, Plumpton, and Cely letters. Second, to consider the desirable traits of men as well as women as potential matches, and to compare the two. And third, to focus on a gender analysis of the traits listed, and thence to discuss other sources in which similar and different ideals of wifehood are prescribed.

I have derived the data from letters within the collections which mention the traits, positive or negative, of potential brides and grooms. I have excluded love letters from the sample, as their emphases seem likely to be too heavily biased. Note that traits are counted wherever mentioned, not just where they represent a positive quality. Thus "youth/age" includes examples where the age of the potential spouse is *too* young as well as where youth is a quality, and "beauty/person" includes examples of potential partners whose appearance is unpleasing as well as where it is approved. Note also that under the category "Love" the person doing the loving is the one considering a potential match, that is, instances of love mentioned in regard to females refer to the male partner's feelings for her, and love mentioned in regard to males refers to the female partner's feelings for him. After dividing the samples into comparative male and female groups, I further divided them according to whether the examples were found within the Paston letters or in one of the three others, before providing a total from all four collections. This was done because there were considerably more examples from the Paston letters than any of the others, and because the dominance of examples from this family may distort the overall total.

³¹Keith Dockray, "Why did Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry?: The Pastons, Plumptons and Stonors Reconsidered" in Michael Jones (ed.) *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval England* (Stroud, 1986).

Table: Traits Mentioned in Regard to Prospective Brides and Grooms

TRAITS	FEMALES			MALES		
	Paston N=11	Other N=8	Total N=18	Paston N=10	Other N=3	Total N=13
Love	2 (18%)	1 (12%)	3 (17%)	2 (20%)	3 (100%)	5 (36%)
Wealth	9 (82%)	6 (75%)	15 (83%)	7 (60%)	2 (67%)	9 (64%)
Social Status	4 (36%)	3 (37%)	7 (39%)	5 (50%)	2 (67%)	7 (50%)
Beauty/person	4 (36%)	4 (50%)	8 (44%)	2 (20%)	-	2 (14%)
Youth/age	6 (55%)	4 (50%)	10 (55%)	1 (10%)	-	1 (7%)
Goodly/virtuous	3 (27%)	6 (75%)	9 (50%)	-	1 (33%)	1 (7%)
Witty/wise/sad	1 (9%)	4 (50%)	5 (28%)	-	1 (33%)	1 (7%)
Amiable	-	2 (25%)	2 (11%)	-	-	-

Sources: Davis (ed.), *PL* 1 and 2; Kingsford (ed.), *SL & P* 1 and 2; Stapleton (ed.), *PC*; Malden (ed.), *CP*.

The table, which compares the eligibility traits of prospective brides and grooms where mentioned in the letter collections, indicates some interesting patterns in male and female eligibility. Some characteristics are important in both brides and grooms. Wealth or property is the most important eligible trait in both potential wives and husbands, though within these examples it is mentioned more often for women than men. Some other points of comparison may be drawn when the proportions for the Pastons and others are compared. For both females and males, wealth is the most often mentioned characteristic in a potential spouse within the Paston correspondence. This is not quite the case within the correspondence of the other three families, where wealth and virtue are of equal importance in a prospective bride, where in the case of prospective husbands the most often mentioned quality is that he be loved by the woman concerned (though here, admittedly,

the sample is very small). In this latter group of correspondents, social status is of equal importance to wealth in a prospective husband. It is possible that these comparisons indicate a greater emphasis on the wealth of a future spouse among the Pastons than in the other families combined, though I would not like to make this point too strongly. Overall, however, the prominence of the issue of wealth and property in discussions of potential brides and grooms in all families seems worthy of notice. The birth or background of future spouses is also important for both brides and grooms, though it is mentioned proportionally more often for males than for females. It also appears that it was more important for a future husband to be loved by his bride, than for a future wife to be loved by her groom, if the numbers of times love is mentioned may be taken as a guide.

But the most interesting, and perhaps more sustainable, point to be derived from the comparisons is that where personal traits including appearance, age, virtue, wisdom and disposition are mentioned with great regularity in regard to prospective brides, they are mentioned hardly at all in relation to prospective husbands. Appearance, age and virtue overtake birth in terms of the frequency with which they are mentioned in regard to potential brides, yet are mentioned hardly at all in relation to husbands. This difference is particularly marked in regard to character traits. To be goodly or virtuous, wise and serious, and of pleasant disposition is of considerable importance if one is a woman being considered for marriage, but hardly important at all if one is a man. A comparison between the Pastons and other families may also be drawn here, as it appears that their correspondence is concerned less with the character traits of both future wives and husbands than the correspondence of other families.

One might reasonably object that it is necessary to consider the nature of the individual letters in more discursive terms. That is, the number of instances in which certain key qualities in a future wife or husband are mentioned in letters is not representative of the perceived importance or otherwise of such qualities, but rather are only representative of the number of times a certain discursive mode was employed. For example, love is more likely to be mentioned as an important factor in a letter in which the discursive mode employed is one of love or courtship, and it is for this reason that love letters between potential spouses were excluded from this sample. The tone of a letter and its contents would more generally have been affected by the relationship between the author and intended reader. Colin Richmond has noted how different John II's letters are, depending

on whether they address John III, his mother, or a woman whom he was wooing³².

Yet while the choice of concerns about a potential wife or husband, from the size of their inheritance to the extent of their love, may in large part be conditioned by both the author of and the audience for the letter under composition, the difference between the concerns expressed about the eligibility of potential wives and husbands is sufficiently large in number to imply that women's eligibility was defined along different lines from men's. Eligibility for wifehood was defined according to a woman's physical and personal characteristics to a degree that male eligibility was not. The evidence points to a difference in the gender educations of men and women. It does not necessarily imply that young men were not expected to learn to adopt masculine identities which included certain personal characteristics or character traits, but rather it indicates that they were not expected to adopt them to improve their marital prospects. They would have certainly needed to learn a certain brand of masculine behaviour to aid in their future dealings with other men, whether in service, professional life or a political career. But in regard to marriage, it was hopeful brides who were under pressure to conform to ideals of feminine attractiveness, in their appearance, their respectability, their sobriety of character and amiableness of nature.

By what means did girls receive their education, and of what did their acquired virtue or goodliness consist? When John Paston II wrote of the likelihood that Margery Brews had learned, by the example of her parents, to be virtuous and good, his words would have conveyed a clearer picture of character to his reader than they do to a twentieth century reader, to whom they seem generalised and bland. I will examine two genres to which young wealthy women would have had access - conduct literature and courtly literature - with reference to the discourses present and overlapping within those genres and consideration of whose interests are served by the discourses. Conduct literature will be considered first, and represented primarily by *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, a significant text regarding ideals of conduct of noble girls in late medieval England³³. The

³²Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Fastolf's Will* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 39-40.

³³Caxton (trans.), *Book of the Knight*. Another conduct book containing advice for women of the nobility was Christine de Pizan's *Treasury of the City of Ladies* (*Le Livre des Trois Vertus*), written in 1405. Unlike *The Book of the Knight*, this does not seem to have had a notable circulation in England, and therefore is not considered in detail here. One fifteenth-century manuscript of *Le Livre des Trois Vertus* may be tentatively associated with England, as it seems to be in an English hand and to have English marginal decorations, but no firm connections have been drawn, despite the popularity in England of several of Christine's works. See Charity Cannon Willard, "The Manuscript Tradition of the *Livre des Trois Vertus* and Christine de Pizan's audience" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966), 433-44, p. 438; eadem, *Christine*

book was originally written in French by a knight - Geoffrey de la Tour Landry - in 1371-2³⁴. It was first translated into English during the reign of Henry VI, a translation which survives in a unique manuscript³⁵, and was re-translated and printed by Caxton in 1484. The book was also popular in France and Germany, with manuscripts and printed versions extant from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Its popularity across north-western Europe suggests that certain ideals of noble maidenhood spoke across national boundaries

Two elements shape both discourse and the texts in which particular discourses are represented. Those two elements are authorship (or the context of production) and audience (or the context of reception). In the case of *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, there are several levels of authorship. First, there is the stated authorship of the French knight who wishes to teach his daughters to "torne to honoure aboue alle other thing", and, remembering his and his fellow's habit of leading young women into ruin in his youth, to give them *exempla* of moral and immoral behaviour so they could "vnderstonde how they ought to gouerne them self" and thus avoid bad reputations³⁶. Second, Caxton claims that he translated the book at the request of "a noble lady which hath broug3t forth many noble & fayr dou3ters which ben vertuously nourished & lerned", and, as a good sales pitch, advises "euery gentilman or woman hauyng such children desyryng them to be vertuously brou3t forth to gete & haue this book to thende that they may lerne hou they ou3t to gouerne them vertuously in this present lyf by which they may the better and hastlyer come to worship and good renomme"³⁷. Thus in both the original production of the text and its

de Pizan: Her Life and Works (New York, 1984), pp. 213-5; Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*, ed. Charity Cannon Willard (Paris, 1989), introduction p. xx. A French conduct book, written for the wife of a member of the merchant elite in 1393 was *Le Menagier de Paris*, translated by Eileen Power as *The Goodman of Paris* (London, 1928), and Francesco Barbarino's early fourteenth-century *Del Reggimento e dei Costumi delle Donne* also deserves mention, but neither of these are known to have had an English circulation.

On conduct literature for women generally see Diane Bornstein, *The Lady in the Tower: Medieval Courtesy Literature for Women* (Hamden, Connecticut, 1983), though her study suffers from insufficient contextualisation of the texts under examination. See also Kathleen M. Ashley, "Medieval Courtesy Literature and Dramatic Mirrors of Female Conduct" in Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (eds.), *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality* (New York, 1987).

³⁴On the versions and popularity of the book see *Book of the Knight*, pp. xi-xxiii, and J.L. Grigsby, "A New Source of the *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry*" in *Romania* 84 (1963), 171-208, pp. 171-5.

³⁵Geoffrey de la Tour Landry, *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, ed. Thomas Wright, E.E.T.S. o.s. 33 (1868). My references will be to the Caxton translation, henceforth referred to as *Knight*.

³⁶*Knight*, prologue, pp. 11-13.

³⁷*Knight*, Caxton's introduction, p. 3.

reproduction for an English audience by Caxton, the text takes its authority from the parental role in the education of children, and also from the masculine role of authority over women.

But behind the immediate text are layers of discourse with their own contexts of production, as is made evident by the Knight's claim to have drawn on the knowledge of two priests and two clerks for help in compiling the text³⁸. The dominant discourse which shaped the *Knight* is clerical and didactic, and has a great deal in common with collections of *exempla* for use in sermons and devotion³⁹. John Grigsby has convincingly demonstrated that the primary source for the book was a French collection of *exempla* from before 1300 called the *Miroir des Bonnes Femmes* or *Miroir aux Preudes Femmes*, composed probably by a Franciscan for preaching purposes, and not apparently of great influence apart from its role in the production of *The Book of the Knight*⁴⁰. Ecclesiastical discourses on ideals of femininity are thus a vital shaping factor of the book, but elite secular discourses of appropriate behaviour are also present. The Knight of the Tower Landry was a real person, with a long aristocratic pedigree in France, and he did have three daughters whose mother died⁴¹. His book uses clerical models of behaviour, but for secular ends. Many of his moral tales deal with women going to court, singing, dancing, feasting and playing at dice with men, or living in secular circumstances with their husbands. Many of the tales are morals concerning reputation and honour, and only some are concerned with one's eternal soul. *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* can thus be seen to represent an intersection of clerical and noble ideals of feminine character and conduct.

The audience for the book is rather more difficult to determine. It is not known whether or not young girls would have read the book, or had it read to them. Yet it is likely that they would have been familiar with very similar stories, as many of them are

³⁸*Knight*, prologue, p. 13.

³⁹See for example Herrtage (ed.), *Gesta Romanorum*; Arthur Brandeis (ed.), *Jacob's Well: An English Treatise on the Cleansing of Man's Conscience*, E.E.T.S. o.s. 115 (1900), John Myrc, *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies by Johannes Mirkus*, ed. T. Erbe, E.E.T.S. o.s (1905); Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, pp. 149-209.

⁴⁰Grigsby, "A New Source". See also his summaries of the contents of the *Miroir des Bonnes Femmes* in *Romania* 82 (1961), 458-81 and 83 (1962), 30-51.

⁴¹*Knight*, introduction, pp. xxxiv-xxxvi.

stock biblical or hagiographic *exempla*⁴². There is no reason to suspect that any of the general messages about femininity contained in this collection were any different from others which circulated widely within the culture. John Fitzherbert, in his 1534 *Book of Husbandry*, certainly felt that women were included in the audience of the book, when he writes of "the Knight of the Tower" who "had manie faire daughters, and of fatherly loue that hee ought to them, he made a booke unto a good intent". This good intent, however, was undone says Fitzherbert, for "by the same booke hee made both the man and woman to knowe more wickednes, subtiltie, and craft, then euer they should haue knowne, had the booke beene obscured"⁴³.

In class terms, *The Book of the Knight* seems more likely to have appealed to a gentry or wealthy merchant audience than an upper aristocratic one. Norbert Elias, an early commentator on the phenomenon of "courtesy literature", argued that such literature gained prominence as a genre during the late middle ages as standards of good behaviour became important to the "secular upper class, or at least some of its leading groups" to enable them to give "expression to their self-image, to what, in their estimation, made them exceptional"⁴⁴. It is rather more likely that it was members of a social group slightly below the highest level who looked to books to teach them the manners and conduct of the group to which they aspired. The elite group are less likely to have needed books to teach them conduct. They could learn about conduct appropriate to their class from parents, governesses or tutors, or a social environment in a noble setting other than the natal home.

What are the key elements of femininity which were encouraged by *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*? The book's contents are, on the whole, as conservative and unsurprising as its origins. Say your prayers. Be courteous and speak graciously to all you meet. Pay little attention to fashion, and care little for clothes (but dress as befits your position, and dress appropriately on holy days). Beware of the dangers of gluttony and drunkenness. Do not be alone in the company of men, nor go wandering about the countryside. Be obedient to your husband. Keep a still and calm posture, and be modest of speech. Do not be argumentative. Be charitable and merciful. But contained within the well-

⁴²For example we saw on p. 83 above how frequently the biblical tale of Dinah, raped for leaving her father's house and wandering into the countryside, occurred in *exempla* collections.

⁴³John Fitzherbert, *Booke of Husbandrie*, facsimile of the 1598 London edition (Amsterdam, 1979), p. 178.

⁴⁴Elias, *Civilizing Process*, p. 50.

worn framework are details which could only apply to women of privileged status, such as the tale of the woman who gave delicacies to pet dogs, despite admonishments that this was wrong when there were people starving, and who became ill and was visited on her death bed by two small black dogs, who licked her mouth so that it became as black as a coal⁴⁵. Such detail seems calculated to excite particular revulsion in spoiled young girls with spoiled little dogs. The debate between the Knight and his wife as to whether women should take paramours is also clearly derived from courtly discourse, with the Knight taking the view that love is ennobling for a man, and spurs him to greater deeds at arms⁴⁶.

As is clear from Fitzherbert's concerns, there is a great deal of material in the book which focuses on sexual matters. Indeed, some of the narratives in the *Book of the Knight* are quite sexually frank, such as the tale of the man and the woman who made love in a church "ioyned to geder as a dogge is to a bytche", and were stuck fast and on view to all who came through the church for a day⁴⁷. Such frankness suggests that noble parents of the fifteenth century did not expect their well-bred daughters to be completely ignorant of sex. Perhaps "family values" became more sexually repressive by the early to mid-sixteenth century, when Fitzherbert expressed his concern.

The idea of feminine eligibility in the book is, however, quite a sexually conservative one. The Knight does not endorse young women's use of flirtation or feminine wiles in order to charm men and win a husband. He offers an *exemplum* which he claims is drawn from his own life. He went to visit a lady whom he thought to marry:

And I beheld her/ of whome I was spoken to And I set my self in
comynycayon with her of many thynges for to know the better her
mayntenynge & gouernaunce/ & so we fill in spekyng of prysoners/ And
thenne I said to her/ damoyzell I wold wel and had leuer be youre
prysoner than ony others/ & I thenke that youre pryson shold not be so
hard ne cruell as is the pryson of englissh men/... & she answerd me nay/
but that she wold kepe hym as dereworthely as her owne body/ & I said
to her/ that he who someuer he was he was wel happy & euerous for to
haue so swete & noble a pryson/ Shall I saye to yow She louyd hym
ynough/ And had her eye quyck & lyght & she was ful of wordes/ &
when we shold departe she was aperte/ for she praid me two or thre
tymes/ that I shold not leue/...And when we were departed/ my lord my
fader demaunded me what me semed of her that I had sene/...& I answerd
to hym & said that she was good and faire/ but I shall neuer be more

⁴⁵*Knight*, cap. 19, pp. 37-8.

⁴⁶*Knight*, caps. 22-33, pp. 163-74. See below, p. 156.

⁴⁷*Knight*, cap. 35, p. 59.

nerre her than I am/...& therfor the ouer grete malepertnes & the lyght manere that me semed to see in her discouraged me so that I maryed not with her⁴⁸.

This passage is interesting because two discourses and their associated versions of eligibility collide here. They are the conservative, clerically influenced discourse which dominates the book, and courtly or aristocratic discourse. The first emphasises seriousness and moral virtue, steadiness and humility. The second approves of lightheartedness, wit, flirtatiousness, playfulness. The Knight sets up the maiden for a fall in this conversation, as it is he who sets up the witty banter which is so central to the courtly interaction of men and women, then rejects the maiden's response in kind⁴⁹. Such lightness of manner is indicative of moral levity, he implies, and says how relieved he was not to have married her, for a year and a half later "she was blamed...& soone after she deyde"⁵⁰.

It is significant that courtly discourse is associated with moral blame. Its real danger, though that is not stated outright here, is that it opens up a space for the female subject, it gives her a voice, it offers her (through "feminine wiles") a method by which she can claim some control over her interaction with men. The possibilities which romance and chivalric discourse open up for women will be discussed in a moment.

The issue of a woman's speech is central to the Knight's rejection of this maiden's form of femininity, and indeed is central to any conservative account of femininity. When it came to complaining about the garrulousness of women, clerical writers could never be quiet, and the Knight follows their lead⁵¹. Several of his exemplary tales deal with the trouble which befalls women who are not "of lytel speche". He tells of a king of England who chose between three daughters of the king of Denmark. The eldest was the fairest, but he rejected her because she turned her head this way and that like a weather vane. The

⁴⁸*Knight*, cap. 12, pp. 27-8.

⁴⁹The role of witty conversation in courtly courtship was made much of by Andreas Capellanus in his *De Arte Honeste Amandi*, and is also apparent in English romance literature of the later middle ages. The temptation scenes of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are notable for the interchange between Gawain and the lady. See J.F. Kiteley, "The *De Arte Honeste Amandi* of Andreas Capellanus and the Concept of Courtesy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in *Anglia* 79 (1961), 7-16; Felicity Riddy, "The Speaking Knight: Sir Gawain and Other Animals" in Martin B. Shichtman and James P. Carley (eds.), *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend* (Albany, 1994). I owe these references to Professor Felicity Riddy.

⁵⁰*Knight*, cap. 12, p. 28.

⁵¹For examples of clerical antifeminist literature which revile women's speech see Blamires (ed.) *Woman Defamed*, e.g. pp. 145, 178, 182-5.

second he rejected because she spoke very much, often without understanding what was said to her. He chose the third, who was not so beautiful, but who "spak but litil & that was wel demeurly"⁵². He told another tale of a daughter of the king of Aragon, who succeeded in winning the heart of the king of Spain where her sister lost, because she was meek and humble and non-argumentative in speech, where her sister was the opposite⁵³. Another argumentative maiden loses her reputation, when she quarrels with a cheating knight over dice, and in revenge he spread rumours that she was in the habit of entering men's chambers at night, and kissing and embracing them "without Candell". "And thus she was shamed by the haultesse [arrogance] of her herte" concludes the Knight, sententiously⁵⁴.

An eligible woman is, by this account, one who is seen and little heard. She is one who will not question the authority of her husband, particularly before others. "It is but honoure to a good woman to suffre and holde her in pees and leue the haultayn langage to her husband and lord And also it is in the contrarye to a woman grete shame and vylonye to stryue ageynst her husband be it wrong or right And in especial to fore the peple"⁵⁵. The clerical tradition of reviling the scolding by women in a marriage was an ancient one by the time the Knight came to write his book, and Jehan le Fèvre was far from alone in sentiment when he characterized a married woman as a "clock" whose "quarrelsome din doesn't stop for a minute"⁵⁶.

That is not to say that *all* forms of speech were barred to women. Some were barred because they were not culturally characterized as feminine forms of speech - and this includes all forms of "public" speech, such as scolding a husband before others⁵⁷. Others are barred because while they may have been gendered feminine, they were unacceptable forms of feminine speech - including gossiping, jangling, chattering and boasting. The

⁵²*Knight*, cap. 12, pp. 25-6.

⁵³*Knight*, cap. 13, pp. 28-9.

⁵⁴*Knight*, cap. 14, pp. 29-30.

⁵⁵*Knight*, cap. 17, p. 35.

⁵⁶Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, p. 178.

⁵⁷I reject the view of R. Howard Bloch who has argued that language itself is feminine and thus despised in medieval culture generally, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 13-35. Certain forms of language do seem to have been associated with the feminine, but it seems absurd to conclude, as he does, that the "letter" and the "law" are feminine and thus despised in a culture which seems fully aware of the power of language to assert authority, and denies women access to authoritative forms of language for that very reason.

denial of women's access to public forms of speech was recognised as a feminist issue by Cora Kaplan, who argued in general terms that

in western societies (and in other cultures as well) public speech is a male privilege and women's speech [is] restricted by custom in mixed sex gatherings, or if permitted, still characterized by its private nature, an extension of the trivial domestic discourse of women...the refusal of access to public language is one of the major forms of the oppression of women within a social class as well as in trans-class situations⁵⁸

Deborah Cameron sees this exclusion of women from public discourse as a form of "silence" imposed upon women. Women certainly have some access to language, but the kinds of language use open to women are not prestigious but rather "silent" forms such as gossip, storytelling, private correspondence and diaries, and these are essentially "private" forms of discourse⁵⁹.

The central argument made by both Kaplan and Cameron - that restriction of access to speech is a form or instrument of oppression - is applicable to the restrictions on speech which conservative and clerical medieval discourses impose on young women. They may not use speech or other forms of language to transgress the model of femininity - asexual, unprovocative, obedient, meek and mild - which this discourse lays down as its ideal. The issue of repression of language use goes beyond speech, and is relevant to wider questions concerning women's education. The Knight of the Tower sees himself as a relative liberal in his advocacy of daughters learning to read, yet he is not interested in them learning to write:

somme folke sayen that they wold not that theyr wyues ne also theyr doughters wyst ony thyng of clergie ne of wrytyng therfor I say answeryng to them that as for wrytyng it is no force yf a woman can nought of hit but as for redyng I saye that good and prouffitable is to al wymen sowle and her sauement than she that can nou3t of it⁶⁰.

The Knight's concept of the education a woman could receive through reading is limited to explicitly moral purposes only. She reads only to gain a conventional, clerically conceived, notion of the difference between good and evil. There is no sense of education

⁵⁸Cora Kaplan, "Language and Gender" in Deborah Cameron (ed.), *The Feminist Critique of Language. A Reader* (London, 1990), p. 58, rp. from *Sea Changes* (London, 1986, from a paper originally delivered in 1976).

⁵⁹Deborah Cameron, "Introduction: Why is Language a Feminist Issue?" in Cameron (ed.), *Feminist Critique*, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁰*Knight*, cap. 89, p. 122.

enabling the expression of an individual subject position, with critical capacities to assess the relative merits of a range of opinions or to create one's own. The Knight's conduct book, in both its aristocratic and its clerical aspects, attempts to shape noble maidens' identities within strictly defined boundaries, and encourages maidens to adopt ready-made femininities. But other types of reading material popular among women may have allowed the construction of rather different femininities, and it is those to which I turn now.

Romance literature, as has often been noted, was popular reading material among late medieval Englishwomen of well-off social background. The model of femininity which medieval English romance literature presents differs in significant ways from the model offered in clerical or conduct literature, and the role of women as readers of romance may have had a part to play in this. Carol Meale's work on the manuscripts of romances and books mentioned in women's wills indicates that this form of literature was popular among women book owners and, moreover, that such evidence may significantly underrepresent the extent to which women acted as readers⁶¹. She finds romances to be the second largest group of books, after religious literature, represented in the wills of women⁶². The tales of Lancelot and Tristram in French were particularly popular among female readers, and *Guy of Warwick*, *Sir Degrevant* and *Partenope of Blois* were among the Middle English romances with clear connections with female readers⁶³. It may be reasonable to assume that romances in general were popular among female readers, as well as among male.

What impact may women readers have had upon the writing of romances? In the discipline of history, and to a lesser extent in the discipline of literary studies, the notion that texts are constructed out of a relationship between the writer and his or her audience

⁶¹Meale, "alle the bokes", pp. 128-158, and "Gode men", pp. 209-225. In the former Meale points out the limitations of codicological and testamentary evidence, as few women left (or could leave) their names on their books, and of the books mentioned in wills a heavy bias would have been towards religious or valuable books. For manuscript collections containing romances and on which women wrote their names see Gisela Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Middle English Romances* (Munich, 1976), p. 44. Ownership, as Meale points out, was not necessary for "readership", as much reading may have taken place communally. See Meale, "alle the bokes", p. 133, and Felicity Riddy, "Women Talking About the Things of God': A Late Medieval Sub-Culture" in the same volume, pp. 104-127. In 1327 Elizabeth de Burgh and her sister Margaret borrowed four romances from the royal collection, and such borrowing may have formed a large part of women's reading practices, Ward, *English Noblewomen*, p. 73. As noted above (p. 117) Riddy has suggested that the Auchinleck Manuscript, which contains sixteen middle English romances, may have been a woman's household book.

⁶²Meale, "alle the bokes", p. 139.

⁶³Meale, "alle the bokes", pp. 138-141; "Gode men", pp. 222-5.

is a relatively recent one. But in the field of linguistics, as long ago as 1929, it was recognised that in verbal utterances there was both speaker and listener, and that both had a role in the speech that was produced. Valentin Vološinov wrote

"*word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee...A word is a bridge between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee. A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor*"⁶⁴.

Vološinov's Russian colleague Pavel Medvedev extended this idea to literature, thus defining literary utterances as neither constructed solely out of an author's impulses, nor solely according to the interests of its audience, but out of both, and thus as occupying a social space between the two. As Paul Strohm, who has made use of such ideas in his readings of Chaucer, puts it, "the text is not transmitted from the author to the reader, but is constructed between them as a kind of ideological bridge"⁶⁵.

Such ideas are very helpful in the attempt to unravel ideals of femininity within different forms of discourse. Caxton's *Book of the Knight of the Tower*, although its narrator addresses noble maidens, was produced primarily for parents with a desire to shape their daughters' identities within a conservative mould. The book forms a bridge between several parties - between Geoffrey de la Tour Landry, William Caxton, and parents who purchased the book. It is possible that daughters, if they ever read the book, enabled the building of another bridge of meaning between themselves and the book, but this may have not been the meaning originally intended. The theory of the ideological bridge between author and audience works only for the initial audience - that for whom the text was written, and who was in the author's mind as he or she wrote. What later readers do with a text cannot be so predicted, and may substantially reshape that text. Still, it must be taken into account that such later readers read and interpret according to their own circumstances, their own desires. The difficulty then is in deciding what the desires and ideals of those readers were.

⁶⁴V.N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (1929; Cambridge, Mass., 1986), p. 86. See also Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London, 1995), esp. pp. 3, 39. Vološinov's ideas are often labelled "Bakhtinian" after the intellectual circle of which Mikhail Bakhtin was a member. Indeed, it has been argued that the works of Vološinov and Medvedev were actually by Bakhtin, but there is little evidence to suggest that this was so. See Vološinov, *Marxism and Phil. of Lang.*, preface, pp. ix-xi.

⁶⁵Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 50.

This is particularly difficult for a group such as young medieval women, whom, in general, we cannot hear speaking with their own voices. As will be suggested here, there is danger in imparting too great a degree of discontent or radicalism to those silent girls.

The version of femininity presented in romance literature may be said to be purely fantastic, and neither derived from observation of "real life" nor meant to have any impact on ideals of femininity amongst its readers⁶⁶. Where a didactic text like *the Book of the Knight* is a utopian narrative of femininity which those involved in its composition hoped would be emulated in real life, romances present characters who were not necessarily read as exemplary in a literal sense, but who offered fantasies of class, character and relationships between men and women which need never find absolute parallels in real life. Yet they are grounded in a cultural context, and therefore the ideals of femininity represented therein must be representative of some of the notions of femininity which were given value within the culture of their production and readership. They may indeed have in turn influenced or reinforced ideals of femininity among their readers. Thus, while romance's connections with ideas of how daily life should operate are looser than those of conduct literature, it is not impossible that there were no links or influences running back and forth between the two⁶⁷.

In the romance *Guy of Warwick*, for example, the heroine Felice le Bel, an Earl's daughter, combines conventional femininity with talents that seem purely fantastic⁶⁸. Her beauty is described in strictly conventional terms (white skin, long tresses, curved eyebrows, a well-shaped nose and mouth that invited kisses, grey eyes, a white neck and a shapely body⁶⁹) and her character is said to be "gentil" and "demure", "curteys" and "free" (65-79). However, she is also said to be highly learned in the seven liberal arts, which she was taught by scholars from Toulouse (80-92). The ideals of beauty and character are

⁶⁶A traditional view of the medieval romance is that it "is not reality shaped and set forth by art, but an escape into fable and fairy tale", Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), p. 138. Certainly, romance should not be read as a literal "historical document", but that does not necessarily imply that it had very little relation to reality.

⁶⁷Meale suggests that the romance *Ipomedon* may have provided a "mirror" of courtesy for readers, such as the merchant John Colyns who purchased a collection containing a copy of the romance in 1517 - "The Middle English Romance of *Ipomedon*: A Late Medieval 'Mirror' for Princes and Merchants" in *Reading Medieval Studies* 10 (1984), 136-91.

⁶⁸*The Romance of Guy of Warwick* ed. Julius Zupitza, E.E.T.S. e.s.. 42, 49 and 59 (1883, 1887 and 1891, rp. in one volume 1966), lns. 65-92, p. 7.

⁶⁹See Chapter Five for a discussion of this ideal.

certainly utopian, but they are not entirely beyond what was possible for young wealthy women. But an education in the seven liberal arts, taught by university scholars, was infinitely beyond the reach of a young English gentry woman. Yet perhaps this extreme, this fantasy, had some connection with day to day notions of feminine roles and capabilities. Where clerical discourses fear and repudiate women's active participation in speaking authoritatively or writing, *Guy of Warwick* allows a female character into the active, privileged and powerful position of learnedness. This may not be purely fantastical, but an exaggerated version of the authority which women had some access to. Not only were young women not all as meek and mild and quiet as didactic texts would like them to be, but authority in women was a quality that could be considered attractive, even an element of eligibility. Felice, it is said, is visited by earls and dukes from across the world who seek to marry her, but she would have none (95-8).

Felice also possesses a degree of power and authority over her aspiring lover, Guy, which is entirely conventional within courtly literature, and also seen in the romances *Ipomedon* and *The Squire of Low Degree*⁷⁰. He adores her, and begs her to marry him, but she will not have him until he has proved himself in deeds of valour. Guy eventually wins her heart through his prowess, but it is she who has set the terms. It is for the man to beseech the woman, not the woman to beseech the man, she tells her maid when the latter takes pity upon Guy (617-26). Debate over the representation of women in courtly narratives has swung from a literalist reading which sees the worship of the *domina* as representative of a move towards a better social position for women, to feminist readings which argue that the woman on a pedestal is not empowered by her worship, because she remains little more than an object of men's desire⁷¹. Perhaps a more interesting reading is to see such female characters not as literally representative of "women's position" in either a positive or negative way, but to see that through articulation of the possibility of such

⁷⁰*Ipomedon* (selections) in French and Hale (eds.), *ME Metrical Romances 2*, pp. 655-60; *The Squire of Low Degree* in Sands (ed.), *ME Verse Romances*, lns. 115-278, pp. 254-8.

⁷¹A fairly recent, yet quite old fashioned, account is Georges Duby's "The Courtly Model", trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (ed.), *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 2, *Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992). A feminist approach is Toril Moi, "Desire in Language: Andreas Capellanus and the Controversy of Courtly Love" in David Aers (ed.), *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History* (Brighton, 1986).

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power romances offer a space in which women can be imagined as agents of authority⁷².

Women's sexuality also receives substantially different treatment in romances from didactic literature. Rymenhild of *King Horn* is driven wild with desire for the hero, and Josian of *Bevis of Hampton* seeks out Bevis in his bed⁷³. It may be significant that two of the most popular books among women readers, judging by testamentary evidence, were *Lancelot* and *Tristan*, whose heroines were passionate adulterers. Guinevere's desire for Lancelot is made clear⁷⁴. She is no passive partner within their relationship. Yet such passion does not go unpunished, with Guinevere's adultery triggering the decline of Arthur's reign, and Isolde punished by leprosy. At the end of the fifteenth century Robert Henryson resurrected Chaucer's passionate Cresseid and gave her leprosy, to make her pay for changing "in filth all [her] feminitie"⁷⁵.

The punishment of women's passion should warn us against too simplistic a reading of romances, and the role of female audiences in the construction of the text. It should be remembered that although romances had many female readers, they had male readers too, and a male-centred idea of ideal femininity presumably was incorporated into the construction of heroines as much as a female-centred ideal was. Also, and perhaps more significantly, it is important not to impart to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century female readers the same values and desires as might be felt by a late twentieth-century female reader, for whom personal authority and sexual autonomy are so important. It should be remembered that devotional reading is documented as women's most favoured reading matter in the English late middle ages⁷⁶. The space which romance literature opens up for authority and sexuality within ideals of femininity is significant, and may be partly attributable to the role

⁷²On the possibilities for power for romance heroines of Anglo-Norman tales see Judith Weiss, "The Power and the Weakness of Women in Anglo-Norman Romance" in Meale (ed.), *Women and Literature*. Arlyn Diamond also suggests that romance offered female and male readers an expression of subversion of social norms, and greater possibilities for personal choice, especially in matters of love - "Unhappy Endings: Failed Love/Failed Faith in Late Romances" in Meale (ed.), *Readings in Medieval English Romance*.

⁷³See Flora Alexander, "Women as Lovers in Early English Romance" in Meale (ed.), *Women and Literature*, for a discussion of this theme in twelfth- and thirteenth-century romances, and Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, (Princeton, 1994), p. 63.

⁷⁴"Lancelot del Lac" in Sommer, *Arthurian Romances*, 3, e.g. p. 263.

⁷⁵Robert Henryson, *Testament of Cresseid*, ed. Denton Fox (London, 1968), ln. 80, p. 64. Leprosy, which was ill-defined and could refer to all kinds of skin disease, was thought to be a venereal disease, among other things - Fox's introduction, pp. 27-8.

⁷⁶Meale, "alle my bokes", p. 137. On women's devotional reading generally see Dutton, "Women's Use of Religious Literature".

of women as readers of romance, but it would not do to overemphasise or romanticise the extent of this space⁷⁷.

The female readers of romance lived, moreover, within specific social contexts. Literary scholars have debated the social status of romance readers. Derek Pearsall argued that English romance had a non-courtly audience, and that it was "primarily a lower or lower-middle-class audience" (which, in Pearsall's curious notion of the social scale, means the bourgeoisie) who took an interest in romance⁷⁸. Stephen Knight's view is that the audience may have been composed partly of nobles, but more by "people who were not in positions of power but accepted the values of those who were"⁷⁹, which seems a particularly productive way of approaching the relationship between the ideology of romance and the values of its readers. Courtly or chivalric ideals flow through the pages of romance literature, thus connecting such works with other literary expressions which are more avowedly "courtly". Ideals of class, as well as gender, identity are constructed or upheld through these literary works. Is it possible that femininity, as constructed within romance, had more to do with nobility than with gender?

A courtly lyric by John Lydgate, which belongs to a common genre in which a lover praises the qualities of his mistress, may serve to illustrate the extent to which courtly femininity was shaped by class concerns⁸⁰. Thirty-five desirable qualities are listed in the poem, and these can be collected under four broad categories - looks, breeding, social graces and character. Beauty or fairness are mentioned six times, and are not described in detail. Under breeding I list "gentylesse" (mentioned twice), "fredam" and "bounty". Under social graces come "glad cheer", "wommanly pleasance" and "wisdom of dalyaunce" (association, sociability). But by far the largest number of characteristics could be gathered under the heading of character. Here I list "debonayre" (gracious in a meek fashion),

⁷⁷Susan Crane characterises femininity in romance literature primarily in terms of such traits as passivity, timidity and pity, in contrast to masculine bravery, initiative and severity, *Gender and Romance*, esp. pp. 18-23. I would not, however, wish to go as far as Crane in denying the active role which romance seems to open up within femininity. My feeling is rather that the degree to which romance opens up positive roles within femininity needs to be considered, but treated with caution.

⁷⁸Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance" in *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965), 91-116. pp. 91-2.

⁷⁹Stephen Knight, "The Social Function of the Middle English Romances" in Aers (ed.), *Medieval Literature*, p. 101.

⁸⁰John Lydgate, "Ffresshe lusty beaute Ioyned with gentyless" in Rossell Hope Robbins (ed.), *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 129-130.

"demure", "appert" (open, honest), "gouernaunce" (self-control), "avysiness" (consideration, carefulness), "prudent of speche", "wyfly trouthe", "parfyt pacyence" "diligence" "perseuerance", "stedfastnesse", "assured trouthe, voyde of varyaunce", "kyndenesse", "stabulnesse" "meeknesse" (twice), "secree" (discrete), "vertu" (twice), "seemlynesse", "innocence", "humble" and "benyngne". Many of these qualities overlap with those endorsed in *The Book of the Knight*. But how far are they *feminine* qualities, and how far are they simply aspects of nobility? Alternatively, to what extent may nobility generally be said to be feminine?

With the exceptions of "wommanly pleasance" and "wyfly trouthe", one could find all the listed qualities in male characters from courtly literature. Beauty is a quality often valued in a literary knight or squire. When Ipomedon arrives at court all the lords and ladies, except the Lady of the court, notice and admire his strong body, fine features and beautiful clothes⁸¹. Guy of Warwick, on entering Felice's chamber, impresses all the maidens with his beauty and appearance, though again he fails to impress the Lady⁸². Lancelot's good looks are noticed by many, in particular by Guinevere⁸³. Good breeding, or *courtesy*, is a definitive element of nobility for men and women and is included in lists of chivalric virtues which define ideal noble manhood⁸⁴. Sociability, or a pleasant manner in company, is also valued across the sexes. The "Squire of low degree" was "curteous and hende;/ Ech man him loved and was his frend"⁸⁵. Qualities of character, or moral strength, are highly valued in male characters, and in particular the qualities associated with steadiness of character, such as loyalty, were central to the chivalric ideal⁸⁶.

The humility and obedience demanded of women in all kinds of didactic or exemplary material, and in some courtly literary material too, were also demanded of the ideal knight or squire. These qualities were crucial to his role in service. Should such qualities be described as feminine? Modern difficulties in understanding the emotional, perhaps gendered nature of service have been made explicit in editorial confusion over the nature

⁸¹"Ipomedon" (selections) in French and Hale (eds.), *ME Metrical Romances 2*, lns. 353-81, p. 650.

⁸²*Guy of Warwick*, lns. 203-16, pp. 12-14.

⁸³"Lancelot del Lac", in Sommer (ed.), *Arthurian Romances 3*, pp. 111, 124-5, 205.

⁸⁴See for example Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 2, 159.

⁸⁵"The Squire of Low Degree" in Sands (ed.), *ME Verse Romances*, lns. 3-4, p. 251.

⁸⁶Keen, *Chivalry*, e.g. p. 159.

and authorship of a poem found among the Paston letters, which both early editors John Fenn and James Gairdner, entitled "Verses written by a Lady...to an absent Lord with whom she was in love". Norman Davis, who based his editorship of the letters around a stronger emphasis on authorship, found that the poem was in the hand of John Paston III, and had running corrections which indicated that the poem was an original rather than a copy⁸⁷. It is easy to see why Fenn and Gairdner guessed wrongly. The first stanza is an unexceptional expression of humility ("On-to your grace in my most humbyll wyse/I me comand"), but the mood becomes more intensive and personal with the second stanza ("But wher a man is wyth a feuyr shake,/ Now hot, now cold, as fallyth by auenture"). He writes to assuage his pain, he says.

The third stanza includes some particularly strong expressions of emotion:

For when I cownt and mak a reknyng
Betwyx my lyfe, my dethe, and my desyer,
My lyfe, alas it seruyth of no thyng,
Sythe wyth your pertyng depertyd my plesyer.
Wyshyng youyr presence setyth me on fyer,
But then your absence dothe my hert so cold
That for the peyne I not me wher to hold.

The remaining five stanzas continue in this fervent strain, with an emphasis on the pain and sorrow which his lord's absence brings, and the remedy which could be provided by his presence. Davis hesitates to offer a firm analysis of the poem, but suggests that as "the expressions are not necessarily those of a woman" they were perhaps directed at the Earl of Oxford, concerning whom John III expressed loyalty in October 1470⁸⁸. He thus reads the poem as an expression of chivalric service. John III may, of course, have been in love with a man, but there is no reason to prefer this to Davis' more likely interpretation⁸⁹.

Regardless of whether this poem is an expression of service or desire, one could argue that John III takes on a "feminized" subject position within the poem. Humility, obedience and desire may thus be seen as qualities which were usually associated with femininity in medieval culture, and that such femininity was appropriate to men in certain

⁸⁷PL 1, introduction p.xxii, pp. 571-3 (probably after 1471)

⁸⁸PL 1, p. 564, John Paston III to Margaret Paston (1470).

⁸⁹On the relationship of service between men see Horrox, "Service", in Horrox (ed.), *Fifteenth Century Attitudes*. On friendship between men in fifteenth-century Norfolk see Philippa Maddern, "Best Trusted Friends': Concepts and Practices of Friendship among Fifteenth-Century Norfolk Gentry" in Nicholas Rogers (ed.), *England in the Fifteenth Century; Proceedings of the 1992 Harlaxton Symposium* (Stamford, 1994).

circumstances. Might one then say that nobility was an essentially femininised identity? After all, Chaucer's Knight was in bearing "as meeke as is a mayde"⁹⁰.

It seems more likely that nobility included many qualities which were associated with the feminine, but that noble men were expected to display other, more masculine, traits as well. In listing the qualities of an esteemed acquaintance John Paston III employed a panegyric style not dissimilar from that of Lydgate's poem, but with some key additions:

...þe most corteys, gentylest, wysest, kyndest, most compenabyll, freest, largeest, and most bowntefous knyght...the lyghtest, delyverst, best spoken, fayirest archer, deuowghtest, most perfyght and trest to hys lady of all the knyghtys that euer I was aquentyd wyth⁹¹.

The qualities associated with chivalry in its military aspect - courage, nimbleness, ability at arms - are what sets noble masculinity apart from noble femininity. Though ideals of class and gender overlap to a very considerable extent within the discourse of nobility, in the end masculinity and femininity take on separate identities. Moreover, traits such as loyalty, obedience, humility, patience, social graces and so on have different ends for men and women. For women they are an end in themselves. They define desirable femininity and perfect wifedom. Going beyond these "feminine" traits is undesirable, even transgressive. But for men they have a teleological aspect. They are stepping-stones on the way to manly glory, which in the chivalric code centres on prowess and victory at arms, and in the political sphere centres on influence and authority. Thus, for example, love is an aspect of the chivalric ethos, but the only reason that it is given value by authors of chivalric handbooks is that it spurs men to greater heights in battle⁹². Service, and its associated qualities of humility, loyalty and obedience, was a path to an elite and powerful world for men, and the greater their achievement, the fewer other individuals they would have to pledge service to. It must be significant that in romances where the heroes possess qualities that might be considered feminine - *Guy of Warwick*, *Ipomedon*, *The Squire of Low Degree* - the hero is neither sufficiently masculine nor sufficiently noble for his lady to consider accepting his love. In each case she demands that he prove himself in deeds at arms, and it is only when he has done so that he is man enough to deserve her love.

⁹⁰"General Prologue", ln. 69, p. 24.

⁹¹PL 1, p. 574, John III to John II (1472).

⁹²For example Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 13, 91-2, 116-117, 193. The Knight of the Tower repeats this clearly conventional argument in the "Argument" - purportedly between the Knight and his wife - concerning whether or not women should take paramours, *Knight*, cap. 122, p. 163.

Despite romance's capacity to, in Susan Crane's words, represent gender as "unstable, open to question, and in danger of collapse"⁹³, it closes off the possibilities which it has opened up by in the end reinforcing a conservative model of gender roles and characteristics. One might argue that romance does enough, in terms of radicalizing gender stereotypes, by exploring alternatives during the course of the narrative, but I see the genre, and the chivalric ethos, as ultimately conservative in its ideology of gender. Perhaps the women readers of romance, though they may have enjoyed the texts' play with gender, were ultimately conservative too, or at least were less radical than one might like to think.

Class Comparisons: Femininity in Urban Society

It is clear that concerns about "gentility" overlapped with concerns about femininity in the education of a young high status woman to be an eligible bride. But to what extent can the ideals of femininity within an elite group be seen as unique to that group, and to what extent did groups of lower social status define their own ideals of femininity? This is without doubt a difficult question to answer, as the range of sources which can tell us about young women in urban and rural peasant society is far smaller than for more well-off groups, and even when some sources survive which offer a clue to the problem they are often the products of a higher social group, or are filtered through a higher group, making it difficult to know whether the representations of femininity included there had any role in the education of young urban and rural women in gender characteristics. In this section, however, I will make some attempt to analyse ideals of femininity within a predominantly urban group, and to think about where such ideals are coming from and whose interests they serve. My focus is on urban groups rather than rural or peasant ones, because sources for the latter are more difficult to come by. I make use of deposition material from the church courts of London and York, three conduct books for young urban women - *The Good Wife Taught her Daughter*, *The Good Wife Wold a Pilgrimage* and *The Thewis off Gud Women* - and secular lyrics which represent young lower status women.

No source as rich and accessible as the letter collections of the gentry and upwardly mobile exist for the urban groups and the peasantry. However, cause papers in respect of matrimonial litigation sometimes include information which may be tangential to the actual case under discussion, but which is revealing of traits considered desirable in prospective brides. Sometimes the information is brief and unrevealing. Alice de Mistreton deposed in

⁹³Crane, *Gender and Romance*, p. 13.

the York court in 1351 that she had heard John Bullock say that the woman whom he wished to marry was "beautiful and good"⁹⁴. It is interesting that her beauty was a consideration, as it was with so many potential gentry brides, but what he meant by "bonam mulierem" is difficult to say. Was her "goodness" made up of similar qualities to the goodness or virtue of eligible wealthy women?

Love and wealth were important considerations among middle-ranking couples too, as among wealthy ones⁹⁵. There is also evidence of a bourgeois concern with social standing⁹⁶. Sometimes this took the form of primarily financial considerations. In a London case from 1472 Thomas Howdon, a tailor, apparently perjured himself to break the marriage between Robert Smyth and Rose Langtoft, a servant of his, because Rose's background was wealthier than Robert's and he felt that "it would not be suitable for Robert to marry Rose"⁹⁷. But the kinds of work undertaken by a prospective bride could also be considered unsuitable by a potential husband. Another London case indicates that a future husband's desire to marry a woman with sufficient wealth was combined with a concern that she give up work activities which he found demeaning.

[Deposition of John Ely, husband in the case] This deponent said that he did not want to contract with Agnes without first knowing how much her friends were willing to give as her dowry. Then he proposed that a certain man named Robert ride to Agnes's parents to find out how much they would give as her dowry...He said...that he would like to have her as his wife if he could have with her five marks by the feast of All Saints.

[Deposition of John Cok] He also heard John saying that he did not wish Agnes to carry the laundry to the Thames and he would rather pay someone else to do the carrying than have her do it. If Agnes's master dismissed her from his service because she would not carry clothes to the Thames for washing, John would take her in and pay for her meals until the time that the marriage was celebrated between them⁹⁸.

⁹⁴B.I.H.R. CP. E 71. I am grateful to Dr Jeremy Goldberg for this and other references.

⁹⁵Numerous cause papers include depositions which refer to the financial desirability or non-desirability of either the bride or groom. Those which I have seen include York causes B.I.H.R. CP. E 92, E 159 and E 215, and London causes in McSheffrey (ed. and trans.), *Love and Marriage*, pp. 37-40, 56-65. The love between the prospective couple is mentioned in York cause B.I.H.R. CP. F 280, and in London causes in McSheffrey (ed. and trans.), pp. 37-40, 67-76. These are only a tiny sample, and dozens more examples could be found.

⁹⁶Here and elsewhere I follow Felicity Riddy in using the term "bourgeois", as it carries more social and moral implications than "urban", "Mother Knows Best", p. 67.

⁹⁷McSheffrey (ed. and trans.), *Love and Marriage*, pp. 59-65.

⁹⁸McSheffrey (ed. and trans.), *Love and Marriage*, pp. 56-9.

The potential bride here, as is clear from deposition evidence, is a servant who has moved to London to work. I do not know the occupation of her future husband, but he is clearly concerned about social rank and the shame that could befall him by having others see Agnes carrying out such a lowly task as laundering. Agnes's desirability as a bride is dependent on the extent to which she reinforces the social position which John would like others to see him occupying.

So far there seems to be a difference of degree rather than an absolute difference between the concerns of higher and lower status groups in required characteristics of a potential bride. There is, however, a difference of vocabulary and expression between the two kinds of sources. The letters' emphasis on women's "goodliness", "virtue" or "worship" does not occur in the deposition material, and the reference to the goodness of a potential bride in the York cause already mentioned is unusual among those I have seen. It is difficult to know whether the difference of vocabulary is due to the difference of discourse, or is due to class differences. Certainly, a word like "worship" seems likely to be class-specific, and perhaps the others are too to some extent. However, the nature of cause papers, and their primary concern with the validity of marriage rather than the motivations for it, to some extent determines the language deployed in the texts.

But the absence of the words does not imply an absence of concern with a potential bride's character. Several depositions make it clear that a woman's sexual reputation, in particular, could affect her eligibility. This also appears to be a sex-specific area of concern, as where concerns about love and money are present in regard to both potential husbands and wives, anxieties about sexuality tend only to be expressed about potential wives. Several depositions bear testimony to the importance of chastity to a woman's eligibility, whereas in none that I have seen is there much concern displayed over an unmarried man's sexual history. The damage which a young woman's poor sexual reputation could do to her marriage chances is clearly described in a London defamation case from 1497, in which one Joan Rokker was accused of defaming Joan Sebar in the street, calling her "Thou strong hoor and harlot", and accusing her of being pregnant from an alleged copulation in a nearby doorway. The deponent, Henry Patenson, says

that because of the speaking of these defamatory words, the status and good fame of Joan Sebar was greatly wounded...He believes in his conscience that Joan Sebar, who is a young woman and suitable for a husband, is so wounded from the speaking of these words that she will

never or only with great difficulty overcome the wounding of her fame⁹⁹.

Similar concerns may have been on the mind of John Wellys, when in 1475 he invited William Rote to come to his house on the pretext of drinking wine. When William arrived John said, "You have violated Agnes, my daughter, and have known her carnally. You will contract marriage with her if I have to force you and you will be sorry". When William expressed himself unwilling, John took out a dagger and made a movement to stab him. The combination of physical fear, and a threat to take him before the mayor and alderman "where he would be confronted by such embarrassment that the shame would compell him to contract marriage with Agnes" persuaded William into immediate contraction¹⁰⁰. This case is slightly more complicated than the last, as the language of "violation" rather suggests that Agnes had been raped. The "shame" and "embarrassment" would come to William not from the act of sexual intercourse but from having civil charges brought against him in the borough court. Perhaps then where respectable femininity is based in large part on chastity, respectable masculinity is based in part in staying on the right side of the law, or in maintaining a reputation for honest and fair dealings. Another London case, from 1472, suggests the lesser stigma attached to premarital sexual relations for men, when Robert Allerton deposes that he never intended to contract marriage with Katherine Aber though he often knew her carnally and had a daughter with her. He claims that the gifts which he gave her were not meant as marriage tokens, "but only because of desire of his body and satisfying his lust"¹⁰¹. If such manifestations of unchastity were shameful for a man then perhaps Robert would not have been so quick to use this line of defence.

While parents, employers and acquaintances were often instrumental in attempts to defend the reputations of young women, the young women themselves were also often involved and seem to have had a sense of the importance of protecting their sexual reputation. In York in 1366, in the case Alice Roding c. John Boton, Alice's father-in-law deposes that he found John and Alice in bed and ordered that John immediately contract marriage with Alice. John refused and Alice said that they were already espoused, which

⁹⁹McSheffrey (ed. and trans.), *Love and Marriage*, p. 86.

¹⁰⁰McSheffrey (ed. and trans.), *Love and Marriage*, pp. 81-2.

¹⁰¹McSheffrey (ed. and trans.), *Love and Marriage*, p. 43.

John denied¹⁰². In another York case from 1417 John Warrington was forced to contract marriage with Margaret Barker after their employer found them alone together and believed that John had known Margaret carnally. Margaret expressed her willingness for the marriage to go ahead¹⁰³. In the *Aber c. Allerton* and *Wellys c. Rote* cases already mentioned the young women concerned seem, from evidence contained in the depositions, as anxious as their parents and friends for the marriages to go ahead. In a culture where rape could impart shame to the female victim - seen particularly in literary examples - it is hardly surprising that consensual premarital sex could endanger the reputation of a young woman far more than that of a young man¹⁰⁴.

Thus a town woman's virtue - in the sense of sexual chastity - seems to have been an important component of her eligibility. But other elements of virtue or goodness such as seem to have been important for gentry girls - piety, humility, quietness of speech, steadfastness - are not evident from this material, as indeed they were not evident from the gentry correspondance. A comparison with bourgeois conduct literature is necessary to establish whether such concerns were felt about prospective bourgeois brides. If anything, the deposition material is more explicit in defining a woman's virtue than are the letters, through the former's explicit reference to sexual activities and reputation. Such matters are not mentioned explicitly in the letter material, but must come through such coded words as "goodly". Matters not considered seemly for discussion within the letters of the gentry were not shied away from in the church court, used as it was to discussing the sexual offences of fornication, adultery, and sexual slander. The information contained within ecclesiastical depositions, therefore, may give us a glimpse of bourgeois notions of what constituted eligibility in a girl, but a glimpse that is filtered through ecclesiastical legal notions of what constitutes moral behaviour and character in women, and in men. The bourgeois conduct literature supplies us with an alternative model of femininity, though one which is also filtered, at least in part, through a clerical ideal.

As with *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, it will not do to take *The Good Wife taught her Daughter*, *The Good Wife Wold a Pilgrimage* and *The Thewis off Gud Women* at face value. These are not simply texts which describe young women's behaviour, nor

¹⁰²B.I.H.R. CP. E 92.

¹⁰³B.I.H.R. CP. F 127.

¹⁰⁴The meanings and value of a young woman's virginity will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Five.

even their ideal behaviour, but represent the way in which one cultural group (the authors and audience) constructs the image of another social group (the young urban women whom they wished to influence). Tauno F. Mustanoja, an editor of the *Good Wife* poem (the earliest manuscript of which dates to pre-1350), notes that it was, judging by the content, probably written by a man and most probably a cleric¹⁰⁵. Felicity Riddy goes further and, basing her analysis on an examination of the manuscript contexts of the extant copies, notes that two of the copies (including the earliest) are found in manuscripts which "are at the interface between clerical and lay cultures", one them being a friar's handbook, and that the others are found in household books¹⁰⁶. While the book was not necessarily written by a friar, Riddy feels it may have been the product of an alliance between male clerics and city fathers¹⁰⁷. The ostensible audience is composed of urban young women of middling rank, yet evidently male clerics and perhaps both male and female heads of households - given the poem's inclusion in household books - found it valuable or interesting. The evidence for the authorship and audience of *Pilgrimage*, dated to the second half of the fifteenth century, is more difficult to discern as there is no internal evidence and the poem survives in one manuscript only, which is of mixed contents. Perhaps its context did not differ too much from that of *Good Wife*.

Where both the *Good Wife* and *Pilgrimage* poems address the "daughters" of their titles in the second person throughout, thus hinting perhaps at an intended, if not actual, audience, *Thewis* refers to daughters in the third person, and seems to address a male, perhaps paternal, audience. The title of the second manuscript of the poem, *Documenta Matris ad Filiam*, maintains the convention of the address of mother to daughter, but the references to daughters in the third person throughout implies that another second-person audience is presumed. This becomes clear at the end of the poem (in the *Thewis* version only, not in the *Documenta* version), with the injunction not to wait too long after a daughter's achieving puberty to have her married. Many "lordis", says the author, are ungenerous, and fail to provide for their daughters' marriages, a failure which results in a daughter's pre-marital sexual activities and her social and financial ruin. "He" who thus fails

¹⁰⁵Mustanoja (ed.), *Good Wife etc.*, introduction, p. 126.

¹⁰⁶Riddy, "Mother Knows Best", pp. 70-1.

¹⁰⁷Riddy, "Mother Knows Best", p. 73.

"his" children shall be cursed¹⁰⁸. The poem is thus aimed, at least in part, at a male, paternal audience. Mustanoja feels that *Thewis*, alongside both *Good Wife* and *Pilgrimage* was influenced by sermon literature¹⁰⁹. It is certainly likely that it came out of an environment that was at least clerically influenced, if not actually clerical.

The conservative, clerical, masculine context which these poems were produced by and, to some extent, for, gives these texts much in common with *The Book of the Knight*. The main difference is that *The Book of the Knight* combines clerical interests with the interests of the noble family, and it is this key difference to which I shall return. First I will deal with the similarities. Like *The Book of the Knight*, both *Good Wife* and *Thewis* include exhortations to piety¹¹⁰ - a standard emphasis in conduct literature which is also used by Christine de Pizan¹¹¹. This may reflect the interests of the clerical "authors" and/or audience of the texts, or it may simply represent perceptions of the "proper" order of priorities in this late medieval culture generally. From there the texts enumerate ideals of behaviour which differ little in type but more in scene, that is, the context of good behaviour has shifted from the noble houses, castles and courtly settings of *The Book of the Knight* to the streets, taverns and family houses of the town. Women should not go to mystery plays without honest company, says the author of *Documenta*, where the Knight exhorts his daughters to keep friends and servants by them at feasts and dances¹¹². Do not wear extravagant clothing, say the authors of all the texts¹¹³, and keep a steady countenance rather than looking around from side to side when in company or public¹¹⁴. Be modest, quiet and little of tongue, and do not argue or scold¹¹⁵. In particular, be meek and obedient with your husband, and play the peacemaker by calming his anger: "Mekeli him answeare and not to attirling

¹⁰⁸*Thewis*, lns. 193-202, pp. 98-100.

¹⁰⁹Mustanoja (ed.), *Good Wife etc*, pp. 88-92, 131, 139.

¹¹⁰*Good Wife*, lns. 1-17, p. 158; *Thewis*, lns. 13, 97-102, 161-72, pp. 80, 88, 92.

¹¹¹Christine de Pizan, *Treasury of City of Ladies*, pp. 72-85

¹¹²*Documenta*, lns. 83-4, p. 85; *Knight*, cap. 24, pp. 43-5.

¹¹³*Good Wife*, lns. 100-6, p. 164; *Pilgrimage*, ln. 16, p. 173; *Thewis*, lns. 29-38, 87-96, pp. 82, 86-7; *Knight*, caps. 20, 25, 26, 30, 48-51, pp. 38-40, 45-8, 52-3, 70-75.

¹¹⁴*Good Wife*, lns. 33-45, p. 160; *Pilgrimage*, lns. 31-33, p. 174; *Thewis*, lns. 41, 109, pp. 82, 88; *Knight*, caps. 11-12, pp. 25-7.

¹¹⁵*Good Wife*, lns. 28-39, 42, p. 160; *Pilgrimage*, lns. 43-5, p. 174; *Thewis*, lns. 14-15, 25-6, p. 80; *Knight*, caps. 12-14, 21, pp. 26-31, 40-1.

[venomously]/ And so you may slaken his mod and ben his derling/ Fare wordes wrath slaket³¹¹⁶. Be sweet and agreeable of manner¹¹⁷. Keep respectable company, and do not wander around in public¹¹⁸. These general rules of feminine conduct seem to span the social groups, though there may be some differences of detail. Such differences are also evident between the three texts which I have labelled "bourgeois", and these may indicate a degree of variation of emphasis due to authorship, intended audience, or place or date of production or readership. Thus, for example, where the author of *Thewis* emphasises that women should be kept at home as much as possible, and not run errands or take charges but rather leave such tasks to children¹¹⁹, the author of *Pilgrimage* merely advises a young woman not to show her legs in the street, for while men may seem to approve they will in fact think that she has little respect for her body¹²⁰.

But there are more than differences in scene or detail between the bourgeois conduct books and *The Book of the Knight*. I identify three key areas in which class differences are defined by the conservative authors and audience of these four texts, all of which seem designed to reinforce an elite notion of the superiority of the noble classes and to keep bourgeois elements well-defined and thus entrenched in their social position. The first of these areas of difference pertains to concerns over dress. *Goodwife*, *Pilgrimage* and *Thewis* all exhort young women to be modest in dress and bearing, lest they get above, or fall below, their estate. "With fen3eand fair nocht mak our-moy,/ Nocht nys, proud na our-deligat,/ Na contyrfut nocht our-hie esstait"¹²¹. "With ryche Robys and garlondes, & with ryche thyng,/ Counterfete no lady as thy hosbond were a kyng"¹²². "Showe not thyselve to proude, passynge thyn astat,/ to make men loke aftor þe and aske, "Who ys that?"/ A

¹¹⁶*Good Wife*, lns. 25-7, p. 160; *Knight* cap. 17, p. 35.

¹¹⁷*Good Wife*, lns. 28, 34, p. 160; *Thewis*, lns. 19, 41, pp. 80, 82; *Knight*, cap. 10, pp. 23-5.

¹¹⁸*Good Wife*, lns. 46-51, 52-5, 59-62, pp. 160, 162; *Pilgrimage*, lns. 7-12, 39-40, pp. 173-4; *Thewis*, lns. 16-18, 63-70 109-118, 122-51, 160, 177-82, 187-202, pp. 80, 84 88-90, 92-3; *Knight*, caps. 24, 56, pp. 43-4, 81-2.

¹¹⁹*Thewis*, lns. 187-9, p. 92.

¹²⁰*Pilgrimage*, lns. 25-30, pp. 173-4.

¹²¹*Thewis*, lns. 20-22, p.80.

¹²²*Good Wife*, lns. 100-101, p.164.

gentyll woman, or a callot (harlot), men wyll deme thow arte"¹²³. Riddy discusses the occurrence of this idea in *Good Wife*, and reads it as a warning to young girls in towns, from clerics and city fathers, to keep to their place within the newly-forming bourgeois group, while at the same time helping the bourgeoisie to define themselves in a particular way¹²⁴.

Such concerns about dress and status contrast with the Knight's anxieties about finery and vanity, which display a more religious than social gloss. Extravagance in clothing is castigated as sinful, when the money spent there could be given to the poor instead¹²⁵. Attention to fashion, moreover, may lead to the deadly sins of pride and lechery, and the Knight singles out such late fourteenth-century fashions as horned headdresses (like "snayles") and plucked eyebrows for particular opprobrium¹²⁶. Here he echoes the concerns of clerical didactic writers, who within their discussions of the seven deadly sins abhorred women's pride in dress, and the lechery it inspired, for fashionable women "are cause þat þe soullys of manye men are lost"¹²⁷. Where the fine clothes of urban girls threaten the social order, the finery of noble maidens endangers souls.

The second key difference is within the elements of respectability, as defined for noble and bourgeois maidens. Sexual respectability was a shared aspect of ideal noble and bourgeois femininity, as has already been noted, and concerns about young women's sexual behaviour and interaction with men run through all the conduct texts under discussion. The key difference between the two is in the alternatives to a sluttish reputation which the texts offer. Hard work and riches hold the key to happiness, the good wife tells her daughter:

Go þou no3t to wraxling, no scheting ate cok,
As it were a strompet or a gigelot.
Wone at hom, douter, and kepe þin ounne wike,
And so þou schalt, mi leue child, sone waxe riche¹²⁸.

¹²³*Pilgrimage*, lns. 13-15, p. 173.

¹²⁴Riddy, "Mother Knows Best", pp. 77-8.

¹²⁵*Knight*, caps. 51-2, pp. 74-6.

¹²⁶*Knight*, caps. 48, 53, pp. 70-1, 76-77.

¹²⁷*Jacob's Well*, p. 159, see also pp. 80-1; W. Nelson Francis (ed.), *The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth Century English Translation of the Somme le Roi of Lorens d'Orleans*, E.E.T.S., o.s. 217 (1942) pp. 43-4; Seigfried Wenzel (ed. and trans.), *Fasciculous Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook* (University Park, 1989), pp. 51-5, 651-61; Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton, 1983), pp. 82-8, 192, 204.

¹²⁸*Good Wife*, lns. 59-62, p. 162.

A good woman likewise, according to the author of *Thewis*, is "euir doand gud in hir houß", does not play on work days, and does not lie long in bed in the morning, "Fore mekill Ill cummys of ydilnas"¹²⁹. Such sentiments, if found in a seventeenth-century text, would probably be labelled the "Protestant work ethic", but are perhaps better seen as an aspect of Riddy's "bourgeois ethos". A noble maiden's path to respectability lay, on the other hand, more firmly within a life of devotion. The Knight's greater emphasis on religious activities and on a religious sensibility guiding one's actions - including refraining from extravagant dress, as already discussed - implies an idea of noble maidenly respectability firmly tied to the demands of piety. *Laborare et orare* - such terms may sum up an important difference in the ideals of femininity prescribed for bourgeois and noble maidens.

Both of these areas of difference between the bourgeois and noble texts - with the emphasis in the former group on avoiding pride not appropriate to one's station and on working hard to achieve respectability - can be seen to serve the interests of the elite groups, while at the same time carving out a social definition by which urban groups could define themselves. The definition of the bourgeois ethos may thus have come from two directions at once - from above and from within. The third area of difference I wish to suggest is one which comes from above only, and which works more subtly than the other two. It is the idea, only implicit, yet present, within texts written by and for high status groups, that an awareness of interiority and a capacity for self-control are definitive of nobility and thus, when seen in women, are perhaps more indicative of her class than her gender.

In the discussion of chivalry and courtly literature above, I noted several character traits which were central to the chivalric ideal and could be included among ideals of noble femininity. Loyalty, steadfastness, constancy, truth, stability, and so on, all imply the necessity for self-discipline, self-governance, rather than external control by others who were more powerful. Such qualities stand in contrast to the inconstancy, untrustworthiness, uncontrolled nature of femininity as it is defined in numerous antifeminist texts. Scientific writers take Aristotle as their authority, and say that because of women's lesser heat, they have "li3t witte and hede, and they ben merciable, and also enuyous, bittir, gileful, and able to lerne, and hasty in likinge of Venus" while "the male passiþ þe femel in parfite complexion and wirkyng, in wiþ and discrecioun, in mi3t and in lordshippe...[and] men beþ

¹²⁹*Thewis*, lns. 16, 86, 157-8, pp. 80, 86, 89.

more hote and drye þan wymmen, more strong and my3ti, more bolde and hardy, more wise and witty, more stedefast and stable"¹³⁰. Such statements seem mild compared with the bitter misogyny of *Le Roman de la Rose*:

No woman will ever be so knowledgeable, so firm of heart, so loyal or mature that a man can be sure of holding her, however much trouble he takes, any more than if in the Seine he held an eel by the tail; however securely he caught it, he would not be able to stop it from struggling so much that it would soon escape. The creature is not properly tamed, being always ready to flee; it changes so much that no one can have confidence in it. I am not speaking of good women, whose limits are set by virtue, but I have not found any such, however well I have tested them. Even Solomon could not find them,...and he himself declares that he never found a constant woman¹³¹.

One might argue that the message here is meant only satirically, ironically. But the theme of women's inconstancy is so pervasive throughout a wide range of discourses - from scientific to clerical to literary to legal genres - that it seems almost to form a dominant discourse on femininity. Statements concerning women's inconstancy also found their way into the bourgeois didactic texts under discussion. The author of *Thewis*, in announcing his reasons for writing the poem, says "womenis honore is tendyr & slyddir,/ and raither brekis be mekil thinge/ as fairest roß takis sonest faidinge"¹³². In *Goodwife* women's inconstancy takes on a specifically sexual character, as it does in many other contexts, and the "Goodwife" counsels her "daughter" to have her own daughters married well and quickly, to keep them from temptation: "*Maydens ben fair and ayable,/ but of her loue ful vnstable,/ Mi leue child*"¹³³.

Such statements are so ubiquitous that one might feel that inconstancy was perceived to be an essential trait in women. Yet, as we have already seen, courtly texts defining ideal femininity include qualities which imply self-discipline and control. The desirability of self-control takes on a sexual aspect when the Knight of the Tower writes about the virtues of chastity, and takes virgin martyrs as his model, whose strength of will was what saved them from unchastity:

¹³⁰Bart. Ang., *De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, caps. 6 and 12, pp. 302, 306-7.

¹³¹Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, ed. and trans. Frances Horgan (Oxford, 1994), pp. 151-2.

¹³²*Thewis*, lns. 8-10, p. 80.

¹³³*Good Wife*, L version, lns. 185-91, p. 202.

the holy vyrgyns that ben in heuen in ioye and glorye gaf them self to martyrdom rather than they shold consente to hit ne goo fro theyre good holy and pure *wylle* for ony yeftes ne for promesses as it is conteyned in theyr legendes as of saynt katheryn saynt Margaret of saynte Crystyn the eleuen thowsand vyrgyns and of many other of whiche the *grete constauce and feruente courage* of them were to longe to be recounted...moche affectuelly I praye yow as my ryght dere daughters that ye daye and nyght wyl thynke on it For many grete and euylle temptacions shall befyght and assaylle yow *Be ye thenne stronge and valyaunt to resiste & ouercome them and loke and behold the place whereoute ye be come of and what dishonour and shame myght come to yow therof*¹³⁴ (italics added).

The strength of will the Knight exhorts his daughters to exercise is enabled primarily by their social background. "Loke and behold the place whereoute ye be come of," he urges. In remembering their social and familial status, and the expectations which went along with membership of that group, his daughters could find the means to resist temptation. Control of the self, according to the social elite, was a quality to be found only within members of their own group

In contrast, there is evidence from a variety of texts to suggest that the chastity of non-noble girls was seen as the result not of *restraint* but of *constraint*. That is, they could not keep themselves chaste but had to be kept chaste. This opinion is represented in *Goodwife, Pilgrimage* and *Thewis* - texts which, at least in large part, are the product of a high status social group and which thus represent the views of that group on the sexual nature of non-noble girls:

Aquinte no3t with ilk a man þou metest in þe strete;
þou he 3iue him to þe, shortli þou him grete.
Lat him go bi þe wai, bi him þou ne stonde,
þat he þorut3 no uilenie þin herte noþing change¹³⁵.

Syt not witt no man aloune, for oft in trust ys tressoun.
Thow þou thenk no þenke amyse, 3ett feyr wordys be
gayssoun [deceitful]¹³⁶.

[Do not let them go to clerk-playis na pilgrimage
Bot þar be with þaim við folk of age.
Thoill þaim nocht rage vith ribaldry

¹³⁴*Knight*, cap. 62, pp. 91-2.

¹³⁵*Good Wife*, lns. 65-8, p. 162.

¹³⁶*Pilgrimage*, lns. 38-9, p. 174.

Na mengill þaim with neuir vith ladry,
 Nouþir nycht nor day to hant allane
 - That had beyn ded of mony ane -¹³⁷

Where the Knight gives young women credit for having the ability to face desires and temptation and withstand them, these three conduct books seek to reduce the chances of young women facing temptation in the first place. Their solution is physically to keep them away from it, either by limiting their contact with young men or keeping them away from places which might provoke temptation. One might argue that the maidens whom such texts address would have had more need of constraint, as their daily activities would have taken them outside the home and brought them into contact with men, and that noble maidens led more secluded, segregated lives. While there may indeed have been a difference of degree in the extent to which bourgeois and noble maidens were allowed contact with men, there is evidence to suggest that noble maidens were indeed in daily contact with young men, and may have found themselves subject to temptation¹³⁸. The Knight claims to have been inspired to produce his book by concerns for his daughters, given young men's propensity to try to lead young ladies astray¹³⁹.

Other forms of literature produced by and for readers of middling to high status offer an image of lower status maidens which focuses on their guilelessness, and on their almost innocent enjoyment of sexual advances. A number of Middle English lyrics tell of the "betrayed maiden", the young girl (often a servant) who either takes part willingly in sexual high jinks, or who is seduced (usually by a cleric - "Sir John" or "Joly Jack" or "Jankin") and finds herself abandoned and pregnant.

alas, ales, þe wyle -
 þout y on no gyle,
 so haue y god chaunce.
 alas, ales, þe wyle -
 þat euer y cowde daunce

is the lament of the maiden who "ladd þe daunce a myssomur day" and who was led astray by Jack, the holy water clerk¹⁴⁰. The girl who "louede a child of þis cuntre" was somewhat

¹³⁷*Doctrina*, Ins. 83-8, p. 85.

¹³⁸See Chapter Three, above.

¹³⁹*Knight*, prologue, p. 12.

¹⁴⁰Robbins (ed.) *Secular Lyrics*, pp. 22-4.

credulous when her lover told her "he wolde be trewe", and "þerfore y lat him haue al his wille", and came to wish "it vndo þat is y-do"¹⁴¹. One maiden finds the advances of her priest, Sir John, so pleasant that "I haue no powre to say hym nay", while another, raped by her Sir John, came to enjoy his attentions - "we made as mery as flowres in may -/ I was begyled-ay"¹⁴².

Such yokel maidens - whose simplicity is such that they have no defences against sexual advances, nor any developed sense of sexual morality - are not uncommon among representations of lower status young women within medieval literature¹⁴³. These foolish maidens, though allowed to speak in the first person, are not presented as having fully-formed subjectivities. They do not function in a fully conscious manner, but rather are carried away by their inherent weaknesses and inherent sexual propensities. The Middle English lyrics have sometimes been treated as evidence for the sexual activities of peasant maidens¹⁴⁴, but it is much more likely that these representations had little to do with real peasant girls and everything to do with a privileged group's fantasies about such girls.

Three of the Middle English *chansons de femme* are found in Cambridge Caius College Manuscript 383, a commonplace book in Latin, French and English, consisting mostly of scribbled grammatical exercises and sample legal documents¹⁴⁵. Julia Boffey calls it a student's commonplace book¹⁴⁶, which suggests that lyrics telling of simple, seduced peasant girls had a particular appeal to a young university student, who was certainly male and probably of middling to high status. Another of the lyrics - where the maiden tells of her rape by Sir John and curses him upon falling pregnant - is found in a manuscript which

¹⁴¹Robbins, *Secular Lyrics*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁴²Robbins, *Secular Lyrics*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁴³The Middle English poems of betrayed maidens belong to a genre that was common in other European literatures, and are of a type often referred to by critics as the *chanson de femme*, J.A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers and their Work: Middle English Literature and its Background 1100-1500* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 64-5. The raped damsels of the French fabliaux which Gravidal discusses are represented as simple peasants, who sometimes say no to the advances of a knight but generally end up enjoying the experience, *Ravishing Damsels*, pp. 104-121. The only extant middle English fabliaux which is not by Chaucer, *Dame Sirith*, also features a credulous woman, a "dumb blonde" according to Hines, who submits easily to a cleric, John Hines, *The Fabliau in English* (London, 1993), pp. 43-65.

¹⁴⁴Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, pp. 192-3, 196-7.

¹⁴⁵M.R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Gonville and Caius College* 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1908), vol. 2, pp. 435-7.

¹⁴⁶Julia Boffey, *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1985), p. 97.

appears to have belonged to a parish priest, given its almost exclusive contents of works of a religious nature in Latin and English. These include *Directions to Parish Priests*, a piece on the seven deadly sins, a piece concerning the day on which Christmas falls and another on church festivals, amongst many others¹⁴⁷. Other lyrics are preserved in collections whose users are rather more difficult to discern, as they consist only of English songs¹⁴⁸. The evidence from the Caius College and Cambridge University Library manuscripts, however, points to a readership of English *chansons des femmes* which was male, educated, sometimes clerical, and of at least middling social status. Such readers may have shared in the assumptions of a more elite group, that low status women were sexually active, intellectually simple, and lacking in the capacity for self-control. These simple maidens could not act in a conscious or controlled fashion, but were rather carried away by "natural", uncontrollable desires and weaknesses. Whoever produced these lyrics and whoever formed an audience for them, they were not interested in representing young village or town girls as individuals of conscious action and steadfast will.

It is important, however, not to be caught in the trap which high status authors set for their readers - that is, of viewing a sense of interiority or self-knowledge as reserved to an economically and socially privileged group. A reported conversation between a courting couple of rural background reveals the importance which this young man and woman placed on knowing the inner lives of each other, and indicates familiarity with the language of interiority¹⁴⁹. The young woman, Margaret, expresses concern that she would not be an eligible bride, given her lack of sufficient goods. To this Thomas replies that she would be made mistress of the goods which he had, and goes on to express his wonderment at the possibility of coming to know a woman "so intimately by her heart and will". Margaret replies that she is afraid that after so intimately examining her heart he would deride and

¹⁴⁷C. Harwick et al., *A Catalogue of the Manuscripts Preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge* 5 vols. (Cambridge, 1857), pp. 505-9.

¹⁴⁸St John's College Cambridge Ms 259, and Sloane Ms 2593, are collections of carols and songs, the former containing one and the latter two *chansons des femmes*, to my knowledge. See M.R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of St John's College Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1913), pp. 294-6, and Edward J.L. Scott, *Index to the Sloane Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1904), p. 427.

¹⁴⁹B.I.H.R. CP. E 215, testimony of Emmota, wife of Thomas Cokfeld regarding the marriage of Margaret Greystanes and Thomas del Dale of Staindrop. Their social status is not easy to define, but mention of a twenty mark dowry elsewhere in the records of the case suggests they were of the substantial, rather than lowly, peasantry.

cast her off¹⁵⁰. The self-knowledge, criticism and control which the writers and readers of literary texts would reserve for their own group seems here to be shared by individuals who, while not at the bottom of the social scale, would hardly have been expected to share the "sophistication" of their betters.

Femininity evidently had no single, or stable, meaning for medieval maidens as they learned to become women. Even a trait such as inconstancy, which was so prevalent in late medieval definitions of femininity, can be shown to have been broken down by the extra considerations of class or family background. Modern feminism has shown that gendered characteristics are products of wider cultural concerns, rather than fixed to an essentialised notion of manhood or womanhood. Through the foregoing discussion I hope to have demonstrated that late medieval English notions of femininity were neither as unified and monovalent as some commentators have suggested, nor entirely essentialised according to contemporary biological notions of the female sex. The versions of femininity which were thus held up as models for maidens on the path to wifhood were therefore defined and approved according to the interests of those in control of the discourse in question. In most cases, those in control were not the maidens themselves, but powerful groups driven by theological or class-based concerns, from clerics concerned to preserve an ideal of feminine meekness, obedience, quietness and chastity, to parents or parental figures who shared many of the same concerns but who were primarily interested in seeing their daughters married, and who also had concerns about class and family identity. Only in the case of the models of femininity offered by romance fiction, I have suggested, may the desires of their female readers be glimpsed, and even there it is important to recognise both that other agendas were operating, and that women readers may have been more conservative in their approach to femininity than a modern feminist would like them to have been. Finally, I shall consider further the question of young women's own feelings about the ideals and models of femininity which they were supposed to learn, and to adopt, and something of the complex relationship between oppression and empowerment.

¹⁵⁰I have not supplied a full quotation here as the document is damaged along its right edge and worn along its left, making a full transcription impossible.

Women's Acceptance of Feminine Roles

The survival of two rare letters from a young gentry woman - Margery Brews - to her potential husband John Paston III, can tell us a little about how this particular young woman responded to and used constructions of ideal femininity to her own ends¹⁵¹. Her letters are illustrative of the uses to which conventions of femininity could be put, and the influence that could be gained through them when no other method was available. Margery draws upon models of ideal femininity in order to construct a certain kind of character for herself - the character of the eligible young woman. Whether she employed such models consciously or unconsciously is not knowable, and perhaps irrelevant. The letters seem to have been crafted carefully with a view to persuading John III that marriage to Margery was a most attractive proposition, regardless of business difficulties with her father. There is the problem of scribal intervention, as Davis has identified the letter as being written in the hand of Thomas Kela, Thomas Brews' clerk. But as it was very common (amongst women, almost universal) practice to have a letter written out by a scribe, there is no reason to think that Kela was in any sense the author of the letter¹⁵². It is possible that Margery wrote out a rough copy, which the clerk then neatly transcribed. It is evident from an uncertainly-written subscription to a letter by Margery in 1481 that she could write a little¹⁵³, and it is unlikely that she only developed that ability as an adult married woman.

The first of the letters is dated February 1477, and the timing of the letter, along with Dame Elizabeth Brew's letter of the same month referring to "Sent Volentyne's Day, [when] euery brydde chesyth hym a make"¹⁵⁴, immediately places it within the discourse of love and courtship. Indeed, with both the address and greeting to "my ryght welbelouyd Voluntyne" the genre of this letter becomes apparent. It is a Valentine, and its subject matter is love. Margery employs a number of the literary conventions of the discourse of love and courtship within the letter. She begins by inquiring after John III's health, then says, of her own health, that "I am not in good heele of body ner of herte, nor schall be tyll I here from yowe". She follows this complaint with two lines of poetry expressing the

¹⁵¹PL 1, pp. 662-3, Margery Paston (then Brews) to John Paston III (both letters February, 1477).

¹⁵²He did however act as her advocate in the "matter", writing to John III, also in February 1477, reiterating Margery's devotion to him and the money and goods he could expect to receive with the marriage. The letter has an entirely different tone to Margery's two, and unless Kela was exceptionally literarily gifted it seems unlikely that he authored Margery's exuberant love letters to John III: PL 2, pp. 436-7.

¹⁵³PL 1, p. 665, Margery Paston to John Paston II (1481).

¹⁵⁴PL 2, p. 436, Dame Elizabeth Brews to John Paston II (1477).

depth of her pain, which no other creature could understand and which she would not reveal on pain of death. The conventionality of this couplet, rather than its literal truth, especially of the second part, is evident when compared with a letter from Dame Elizabeth, who complains to John III that "3e hafe made hyr suche advokett for yowe þat I may neuer hafe rest nyght ner day for callyng and cryeng vppon to bring the saide mater to effecte"¹⁵⁵. The trope of illness or suffering due to love is absolutely standard in courtly or love literature, going back to Andreas Capellanus in the twelfth century, and still prevalent in the courtly lyrics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries¹⁵⁶.

Margery follows her couplet with a brief mention of the "mater", and her mother's failure to prise any more money out of her father for her dowry. She moves on swiftly from this to a use of love as a bargaining tool: "yf that 3e loffe me, as I tryste verely that 3e do, 3e will not leffe me þerfor: for if þat ye hade not halfe þe lyvelode þat 3e hafe, for to do þe grettyst labure þat any woman on lyve myght, I wold not forsake 3owe". Financial considerations are thus brushed aside, made to seem trivial in comparison with love. Margery knows that if she cannot win John III by practical means she must therefore emphasize the emotional side of marriage. She is, in a sense, talking John III into being in love with her.

There follows another six lines of verse, in which Margery expresses her willingness to obey his command to be true to him, and to respect his commands above those of her family. Her heart bids her to love him above everyone else, she says. She ends on a reassuring, optimistic note: "And yf thei be neuer so wroth, I tryst it schall be bettur in tyme commyng". This jauntiness is a little at odds with the pain and suffering she claimed at the beginning of the letter, and with the "full heuy herte" she claims at the end.

Margery's attempts to talk John into loving her rely little on rational argument and very much on constructing herself as a feminine object of desire. She is thus less direct in her persuasion than Cicely Daune, who wrote to John II expressing concern over the possibility that he had married another. Cicely contends that if John married her instead he would be loved, and love is "most excellent riches in þis worlde", while earthly goods are transitory. She argues that marriage to her would therefore be a rational, sensible

¹⁵⁵PL 2, p. 436.

¹⁵⁶See Robbins, *Secular Lyrics*, pp. 120-131.

decision: "me semez wedding wolde haue goode avyusement"¹⁵⁷. Margery's method is more subtle. She portrays herself as a woman who is loving, patient, forgiving, humble, devoted and charming, that is, as an ideal bride.

Margery's second letter is less generic and more concerned with practical matters. It is written in reply to one by John, which is perhaps itself a reply to Margery's Valentine. If John's letter had been a reply to Margery's, it appears that the tone was rather less romantic. She repeats to him what he has apparently written, ie. that he will come to Topcroft - the Brews' house - to conclude the "mater" with her father, and that if the marriage prospects do not look any better for him then he shall not put her father and mother "to no cost ner besenesse". This letter therefore seems to be one last desperate attempt by Margery to persuade John to marry her. But she presents it in a passive, non-persuasive form. She does not say that *he* will be made happy by marrying her, but that if he "cowde be content wyth þat good and my por persone, I wolde be þe meryest mayden on grounde". Earlier she has stated that she "wold be most glad of any creature on lyve so þat the mater myght growe to effect". He is thus released from pressure or expectations, she does not set him up for disappointment. If he marries her he will be under no pressure to provide anything, for simply in the act of marrying she will be made happy. She apparently hands over to him the power to make her happy or not. His own power to make himself happy, she implies, is entirely in his hands.

But though the pressure is not expressed directly, it is certainly present. Margery calls John III her Valentine twice in this letter, and herself his Valentine at the end. She is thus making the romantic and loving nature of their relationship a given, a fact, and implies that they are equal in this respect. Clearly however, they are not. Another woman lurks in the background. "[If] 3e myght hafe mech more good, as I hafe vnderstonde be 3owe afor, good, trewe, and lovyng Volentyne...let it [the matter] passe, and neuer more to be spokyn of as I may be 3owr trewe louer and bedewoman duryng my lyfe". Margery's apparent guilelessness slips here. Obviously, if John has told her he might be able to get a better deal with another woman, then he cannot possibly be her good, true and loving Valentine. Is Margery having a slight dig at John for his inconstancy, or is she cunningly, through flattery, opening up a space for him to slip into? This space is one which would be to her advantage, as if he accepts her definition of his role in their relationship then she has made it real.

¹⁵⁷PL 2, p. 390, Cicely Daune to John Paston III (?1463-8).

These letters provide a rare glimpse of a young woman who wanted to marry a certain man, and who was relatively powerless - as a woman, but especially as a gentry daughter - to bring that about. The marital negotiations - which she so delicately refers to as "the mater" - are ostensibly taking place only between John III and her parents. She calls negotiations for her own marriage "þe mater betwux my fadur and 3owe". Her mother has some role in the negotiations, and is allowed to plead on Margery's behalf, where apparently Margery does not broach the matter directly with her father at all. There is a chain of command going on. We know that Margery talks to her mother, and her mother talks to her father, and both parents, but particularly her father, talk to John. At first sight it appears that Margery has very little say, very little power. But she sees a way to bypass the "mater" and conduct her own negotiations on completely separate terms. She, through putting herself in the feminine role of the loving, devoted, undemanding, easy to please, vivacious and agreeable woman, makes herself desirable. She casts herself according to the ideals of femininity in a future wife. Thus femininity, though limiting, could also be empowering, in the sense that it helped Margery to gain that which she so desired.

The last sentence may seem controversial, and is not meant to belittle the restrictive nature of pressures to be feminine. But in past cultures, as in today's, ideals of femininity play too complicated a role merely to be dismissed as oppressive in absolute terms. Women's acquiescence to ideals of femininity have puzzled and troubled many modern feminists. Many feminist critics have merely stated the problem, without adequately analysing the reasons for it¹⁵⁸. The complexity of the issue is heightened when we consider the oppressiveness of ideals of masculinity. The recently developed men's movement is partly driven by the demands of men who find conventional gender roles limiting and unfulfilling. The result is our current state of gender confusion, which on the one hand expresses itself in increasingly essentialist polemics expounding the virtues of innate masculinity or femininity, seen for example in tremendously popular books such as *Iron John* or *Women who Run with the Wolves*¹⁵⁹, and on the other hand seeks to transcend the essentialist association of masculinity with males or femininity with females through transvesticism or transsexualism. In neither case is the central problem of gender

¹⁵⁸A recent best-selling example, which argued that the oppression of women through femininity is a male conspiracy, is Wolf's *Beauty Myth*.

¹⁵⁹Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book about Men* (Reading, Mass., 1990); Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Contacting the Power of the Wild Woman* (London, 1992).

stereotypes addressed. The stereotypes are merely reinforced. But they are undeniably attractive, otherwise they would be rejected altogether.

The problem, for both men and women, is that while gender stereotypes can be constricting, they may also hold benefits for those who adopt them, or some of them. To be gendered is not only to be oppressed, it is to be socialised, and socialisation brings benefits. Those who remain entirely on the margins find much greater difficulty in having their voices heard, in criticising aspects of their social system or in gaining advantage for themselves as individuals. Margery Brews used models of feminine desirability to enable herself to marry the man she wanted. The identities, including those of gender and class, which are open to an individual to adopt, are to a large extent already constructed. Some may choose non-conformism, but others (consciously or unconsciously) recognise that swimming in the mainstream is an easier way to achieve their desires. In rejecting conventionally gendered identities, one may also ultimately have to take the brave step of rejecting wider conventions of identity.

CHAPTER FIVE

BEING FEMININE

While maidenhood represented a stage in women's life cycle in which they learned to be feminine, it was also, according to certain representations, the stage during which they were most consummately feminine. The image of the woman as maiden is powerful and ubiquitous within medieval culture, from literary manifestations, to visual representations, to images of female sanctity. The young, beautiful, sexually desirable yet steadfastly chaste maiden had a visual and imaginative appeal far in excess of the social significance of young unmarried women. In this chapter I argue that maidenhood, as a stage defined by tension between sexual maturity and the necessity for chastity, was not only a popular image of femininity, but indeed represented the peak of femininity. Maidenhood, within certain discourses at least, was conceived as the perfect age of woman's life.

The questions of why the maiden was a supremely desirable version of femininity, and by whom she was desired, open up the issue of the meanings of virginity in this period. How and why did the ideal of virginity develop from a spiritual state which could apply equally to men and women, to an explicitly physical state which applied primarily to women? What were the theological and social bases to the ideology of the youthful virgin as the most valued form of femininity? Such questions will be addressed in the final section.

Maidenhood as The Perfect Age of Woman's Life

Scholars who have discussed the medieval theme of the "ages of man" - a theme with roots in ancient writings and which appears in medieval discourses from the medical or natural philosophic, through the literary to the art historical - have noted that such models of the life cycle often portray one age as the peak, or prime, or "perfect" age of man. Mary Dove devoted her book on the ages to this aspect of the theme¹. John Burrow's sweep is slightly broader, but he too discusses the perfection of one of the ages over all the others². Sears does not develop this as a theme for discussion, but notes that some of the authors in her study describe a pattern of growth and decline in the ages of man³. The authors are in

¹Dove, *Perfect Age*.

²Burrow, *Ages of Man*, esp. pp. 5-11.

³Sears, *Ages of Man*, pp. 45, 56, 119.

general agreement about which age constitutes "perfect age" within the scheme. It is what we might call middle age, but in the ages scheme was called *iuventus*, a phase which has a variable span (depending on the individual account) but roughly covers the ages from about the mid twenties to the mid forties. This age, according to the medieval writers, is the perfect age of man's life, as it is then that a man is at the peak of his physical and mental powers⁴. Where youth is characterised by physical health and undeveloped mental capacity, and old age is characterised by wisdom and ailing health, middle age represents a perfect balance and peak of the two characteristics⁵. Burrow argues that Chaucer is consciously drawing on this theme of the three ages in his construction of characters within the "Knight's Tale" - the Knight himself being representative of perfect age while his son, the Squire, represents youthful energy and mental unfulfilment - especially in Arcite and Palamon (*adolescentia*), Theseus (*iuventus*), and Egeus (*senectus*)⁶.

As Burrow notes, this philosophical, literary and artistic theme overlaps with the theological idea of the perfect age of the body⁷. Theologians from St Augustine, through Ælfric to Peter Lombard discussed the knotty issue of the resurrection of the body⁸. They took inspiration from St Paul's words in Ephesians, "until we all meet into the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fulness of Christ"⁹. The passage seems to have been interpreted in literal fashion and these later commentators argued that the body at the resurrection, which would be the perfect body, would take on the perfect age of Christ. Some, such as Augustine held that this would be thirty, as that was the age at which Christ began his ministry. Others, including Ælfric and Peter Lombard, argued that it would be thirty-three, as this was the age of Christ at his crucifixion. Either way, the perfect age of Christ, and therefore the age of the human body at resurrection, fell neatly within the age of *iuventus*, portrayed as

⁴Dove, *Perfect Age*, esp. p. 21.

⁵Burrow, *Ages of Man*, pp. 6-11.

⁶Burrow, "Knight's Tale and the Three Ages" in Burrow, *Essays*, pp. 27-48.

⁷Burrow, *Ages of Man*, pp. 104, 135-44.

⁸Burrow, *Ages of Man*, pp. 135-44; Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York, 1995), esp. pp. 98, 122; Jackie Tasioulas, "Seeds of Perfection: The Childlike Soul and the Resurrection of the Body" in Goldberg and Riddy (eds.), *Youth in the MA* (forthcoming).

⁹Ephesians 4.13.

perfect age within the ages scheme.

Such unity of thought could easily lead us to the conclusion that the ages of "man" stood for the ages of humanity, and that therefore women reached their peak of the life cycle at the same age as men, that the conceptual "perfect age of woman" was explained within that wider framework. Certainly, none of the medieval models of the ages scheme state that a different scheme existed for women. Some literary and visual representations of the ages scheme include images of women, while some literary depictions use feminine figures to stand for different stages of the life cycle¹⁰. Dante employed the latter approach in *Il Convivio*, depicting the soul as female - sweet, bashful and beautiful in her youth, self-controlled and strong in her prime, prudent, just and generous in old age, and at the end of life returning to god as a bride¹¹. Similarly, the *Secretum Secretorum*, a pseudo-Aristotelian mirror for princes which was translated into English in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, includes a description of the four seasons which, in some versions, are represented by analogy with a woman's life. Thus in the mid fifteenth-century "Ashmole" version, in *veere* the earth is "as a faire spouse and a full specious damysell, arraied with brooches and clad with many-fold coloures". In *somer* it is "as a spouse full in the body, with hetes swellyng". In *hervest* the world "is like a woman of full age lakkyng clothes, levyng youghth and hastyng to age", and in *wynter* it is "as an olde woman, greued and decreped in age, lakkyng clothes, neygh to death"¹².

Such visual and literary portrayals of the theme might be said to indicate that the category "woman" was subsumed within the general framework. Medieval perceptions of the life cycle, in other words, were felt to apply to women as much as to men. Yet there are serious problems with such a conclusion. Is it really feasible to argue that *iuventus*, the period from one's mid twenties to mid forties, with its peak in the mid thirties, was held to be the prime of a woman's life? Do representations of women in literature and art generally give favourable emphasis to the woman in middle age? The uses of feminine imagery in the *Convivio* and *Secretum Secretorum* do not directly deal with the ages of woman, but rather use female figures to represent constructions of the soul and the seasons.

¹⁰See Sears, *Ages of Man*, pp. 99-113.

¹¹Dante, *Il Convivio* in K. Foster and P. Boyde (eds. and trans.), *Dante's Lyric Poetry*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 137-9.

¹²M.A. Manzalaoui (ed.), *Secretum Secretorum: Nine English Versions*, E.E.T.S. o.s. 276 (1977), pp. 55-8; see also, pp. 153-5, 346-9, 572-4.

Personification of abstract concepts in female form is hardly unusual, and is often incongruous with contemporary beliefs about feminine character¹³. There is little evidence which suggests that middle age was considered a prime age for women, not at least amongst the male-authored conservative discourses which make up the bulk of the available representations of women in this period. When January, of Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale", states that his ideal wife "shal nat passe twenty yeer, certayn", and "I wol no womman thritty yeer of age;/ It is but bene-straw and greet forage" he was probably being satirised, as the old man who sought an unsuitably young mate, yet he was not alone in holding to an ideal of youthful feminine desirability¹⁴.

Burrow presumes that the ages of woman are subsumed within the ages of man, and provides examples of female literary figures as part of his overall argument¹⁵. Having discussed the theological notion that the body would be resurrected at the perfect age of Christ, he writes:

Something like this doctrine lies behind the *Gawain*-poet's portrayal of the maiden in *Pearl* who, having died in infancy, nevertheless appears in her father's vision (albeit before the general resurrection) as a grown woman. For in heaven, 'there shall no more be an infant of days'.¹⁶

Yet this example must give us pause, for, far from supporting Burrow's link between the perfect age of man and the perfect age of Christ, the Pearl Maiden must represent an overall flaw in the identification of the perfect age of man, so long as "man" is taken to mean humanity. For surely no reader would agree that the Pearl Maiden appears in the body of a thirty, or thirty-three, year old woman. Her physical characteristics and signs of age will be discussed in a moment. I will argue, building on the argument of Mary Dove, that the "man" of the ages of man is by no means gender-neutral, but does indeed refer to *man*¹⁷. The ages of woman, and the perfect age of woman's life, must be sought elsewhere. Neither the theme of the ages of man, nor the theological doctrine of the age of the body

¹³See Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London, 1985), pp. 64-5.

¹⁴"The Merchant's Tale", lns. 1417, 1421-2, p. 156.

¹⁵Burrow, *Ages of Man*, e.g. pp. 104-5, 112, 122-3, 155-6, 169.

¹⁶Burrow, 1986, pp. 104-5.

¹⁷Dove, *Perfect Age*, p. 25. Sears does not directly engage with this issue, but notes that representations of women within the ages scheme generally were exceptional, *Ages of Man*, p. 24.

at resurrection, are really interested in women. It is thus necessary to look elsewhere to find clues to the question of what is the perfect age of woman.

The interests of theologians and their theories on the resurrected body provide a way into thinking about the perfect age of woman. For, although the theologians of the resurrection do not obviously concern themselves with questions concerning women, we may take as inspiration their idea that the body in heaven will be the perfect body, and consider the ages of the female figures who, in medieval sources, are represented as having bypassed purgatory and gone straight to heaven. I will discuss three such female figures - the Pearl Maiden, the virgin martyrs, and the Virgin Mary. The representations of all three, I will argue, match the stage in women's life cycle which I have called maidenhood.

The "Pearl Maiden" is a name which modern commentators have given to a female figure in the Middle English poem *Pearl*, written in the late fourteenth century by an unknown author, and surviving in only one manuscript¹⁸. The poem describes a dream vision, in which a male speaker is confronted by a vision of his daughter, his "pearl", who had died at the age of two, but who appears to him as a beautiful and courtly young woman, a "maiden", as he calls her¹⁹. The Pearl Maiden is interesting to me because she has two ages - she is a "faunt" (161) or small child, but in death she has taken on the body of a "maiden of menske" (162), or "damyselle" (361). Her physical appearance is described at length (197-228). Her dress is in the style of a fashionable young woman of the late fourteenth century, and her dress is all white and covered in pearls (197-204)²⁰. Her skin is the purest white - whiter than whale bone, or passing the fleur de lys (212, 753). She

¹⁸For background information on the date, authorship and manuscript of the poem see *Pearl*, ed. E.V. Gordon (Oxford, 1953), introduction, and *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter, 1987), introduction. References are to the Andrew and Waldron edition, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁹The Maiden's age at the time of her death is stated "Þow lyfed not two 3er in oure þede" (483), while the relationship between dreamer and maiden is implied when he says "Ho wat3 me nerre þen aunte or nece" (233). There has been debate over the interpretation of the poem since early this century. Some have read it as pure allegory, with the Pearl Maiden representing some abstract concept such as purity, while others have taken a more literal approach, seeing her as the daughter of the dreamer. A useful approach seems to be to see that the Pearl Maiden combines realistic and symbolic qualities. See Andrew and Waldron (eds.), *Pearl Ms*, p. 32, n. 7; P.M. Kean, *The Pearl: An Interpretation* (London, 1967), pp. 115-120. For background to the debate see Ian Bishop, "Pearl" in *its Setting* (Oxford, 1968), p. 15; John Conley (ed.), *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays* (Notre Dame, 1970); and more recently, David Aers, "The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*" in *Speculum* 68 (1993), 54-73, pp. 55-6.

²⁰Gordon notes that the Maiden's dress is "a very simple form of the aristocratic dress of the second half of the fourteenth century", with the very long sleeves - "lappe3 large" (201) - characteristic of aristocratic dress, *Pearl*, p. 56, n. 228.

wears a crown of pearls and flowers: "A py3t coroune 3et wer þat gyrl/ Of marjorys and non oper ston,/ Hi3e pynakled of cler quyt perle,/ Wyth flurtd flowrez perfet vpon" ("That girl also wore a decorated crown of pearls and no other stone, with high pinnacles of clear white pearl, with perfect flowers figured on it") (205-8). Her hair is golden and hangs unbound around her face and on her shoulders: "As schorne golde schyr her fax þenne schon,/ On schyldere3 þat leghe vnlapped ly3te" ("her hair, that lay lightly on her shoulders, unbound, then shone like bright cut gold") (213-214). She has grey eyes, and likens herself to a rose (254, 269). The dreamer marvels at her "fayre figure" and dazzling beauty (747-53). These physical characteristics - white skin, long loose golden hair, grey eyes, the likeness to a rose, marvellous beauty and fairness of figure - are all aspects of the courtly ideal of feminine beauty, which can be found in almost any youthful heroine of late medieval English romance or courtly lyric, and will be examined in a moment. That the Pearl Maiden's appearance is meant to represent her physical state on entering heaven is made clear near the end of the poem when she joins a procession of a hundred thousand "vergynez", all dressed as she is - crowned, all in white and covered with pearls - and goes in with this merry band to meet their bridegroom (1095-1152). At that moment her childish age - a mere two years old - and her maidenly body seem combined, as the dreamer is moved to see his "lyttel quene", making merry with her friends (1147-50). Her childish state is symbolic of her innocence, as is made clear during her debate with the dreamer over the parable of the vineyard (481-660), but her soul appears in adult form.

Many commentators, including Burrow, have linked the Pearl Maiden's physical state to the theology of the resurrection²¹. The poet could not represent her strictly speaking in resurrected form, as that would imply that the raising from the dead had already occurred, but still "it is appropriate that this body should have the appearance of the one which, according to the highest patristic authority, she will assume after the General Resurrection"²². What no critic seems to have taken into account is that the Pearl Maiden is not represented in the body of a woman in her mid thirties. While her age is not stated, it may be deduced from her representation, as will be discussed below. Her age might also be suggested by comparison with Boccaccio's *Olympia*. This poem bears a striking similarity to *Pearl*, in that it is a dream vision in which a father sees and speaks to his daughter, who had died at five and a half but appears to her father as a girl of marriageable

²¹See for example Bishop, "*Pearl*", p. 101.

²²Bishop, "*Pearl*", p. 101.

age²³. Thirty or thirty-three was *not* the most desirable marriageable age for women, particularly in Tuscany. We might expect her to appear, rather, in the body of a young woman in her late teens²⁴.

There are three elements of her representation which she shares with the iconography of the virgin martyrs and the Virgin Mary, who will be discussed in a moment, and which indicate that she was meant to be imagined as a maiden rather than an older woman. Those elements are her courtly beauty, her loose golden hair, and her crown. The conventions concerning feminine beauty were remarkably consistent in the period under discussion. The beautiful woman almost always, in both literary and visual media, has long golden hair, very fair skin, fine features, sparkling eyes, curved dark eyebrows, red lips, and a long and slender body with small breasts but a protruding belly. She often has grey eyes, though at other times they are blue, a cleft chin, and delicately rosy cheeks²⁵. Matthew of Vendôme and Geoffrey of Vinsauf supply sample descriptions of the beautiful woman in their guides to poetical writing²⁶, and the convention is also prominent within romances and lyrics²⁷. A prominent aspect of the feminine ideal is her slenderness and delicacy:

Let the upper arms, as long as they are slender, be enchanting. Let the fingers be soft and slim in substance, smooth and milk-white in

²³Giovanni Boccaccio, *Eclogues*, trans. Janet Levarie Smarr (New York, 1987), pp. 156-69. The similarities between *Pearl* and *Olympia* have been noted by scholars since early this century, but it has not proved possible to confirm whether the Pearl Poet was influenced by the latter. *Olympia* survives in a manuscript copy from about 1367-8, and may have been composed earlier, and thus in terms of timing it is possible that the Pearl Poet saw Boccaccio's poem. Gordon suggests *Pearl* may be dated to between 1360 and 1395, and belongs more probably to the latter part of this period, *Pearl*, introduction, p. xlv. The fact that *Olympia* is in Latin rather than Italian would have made it more accessible to readers outside Italy. But, in short, no firm connections may be drawn. See Richard Newhauser, "Sources II: Scriptural and Devotional Sources" in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (eds.), *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 268. I am indebted to Professor Felicity Riddy and Mr Nick Havely for their communications regarding this subject.

²⁴See above, p. 59.

²⁵See D.S. Brewer, "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially 'Harley Lyrics', Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans" in *Modern Language Review* 50 (1955), 257-69; Walter Clyde Curry, *The Middle English Ideal of Personal Beauty; as Found in the Metrical Romances, Chronicles, and Legends of the XIII, XIV, and XV Centuries* (Baltimore, 1916); Kim M. Phillips, "The Medieval Beauty Myth: An Aesthetics of Virginité" in *Medieval Life* 5 (1996), 10-13.

²⁶Matthew of Vendôme, *The Art of Versification*, trans. Aubrey E. Galyon (Ames, 1980), p. 43; Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *The Poetria Nova*, translated in Ernest Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine* (The Hague, 1971), pp. 45-7.

²⁷See for example the description of Felice in *Guy of Warwick*, lns. 65-74, p. 7; Robbins (ed.), *Secular Lyrics*, pp. 120-8, 144-5, 183, 223; G.L. Brook (ed.), *The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of Ms. Harley 2253* (Manchester, 1968), pp. 33-4, 37-41.

appearance, long and straight in shape...Let the snowy bosom present both breasts like virginal gems set side by side. Let the waist be slim, a mere handful...let the leg show itself graceful; let the remarkably dainty foot wanton with its own daintiness²⁸.

The notion that fairness and slenderness were particularly beautiful in women seems to have spilled over from art to life, for John Paston II writes to John III of a Mistress Gretkyn, who "hathe ben verry seke, but it hathe doon hyre goode for she is fayrer and slenderer than she was"²⁹.

For my purposes it is most significant that youthfulness was a key element of this ubiquitous ideal of feminine beauty. The ages of some middle English literary heroines who are described as beautiful are stated, and they are always in their teens. Freine is twelve when men begin to notice her beauty, and Goldboru, "the fairest wuman on live" is an heiress waiting to come of age³⁰. Chaucer's Alison - whose beauty is conventional yet slightly satirised - is eighteen, and his Virginia - a "mayde of excellent beauty" who is described in conventional terms - is fourteen³¹. Where the age of the beautiful woman is not stated, her youth is implicit in her figure, with its slender limbs, small high breasts, narrow waist and smooth white skin. An ugly woman, in contrast, is always old, with loose skin, a forest of wrinkles, and breasts like deflated bladders³².

Some of those who have discussed the subject of beauty in history have argued that feminine beauty is ahistorical, eternal and unchanging³³. Authors such as Kenneth Clark and Arthur Marwick seem profoundly unaware of their own subjectivities as white, middle class or higher, heterosexual males of the mid or later twentieth century, and the effect of such

²⁸Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, p. 45.

²⁹PL 1, p. 455 (1473).

³⁰"Lay le Freine", lns. 238-40, 257-70, pp. 241-2; "Havelok the Dane", lns. 258-9, p. 65, both in Sands (ed.), *ME Verse Romances*.

³¹"The Miller's Tale", lns. 3221-3270, pp. 68-70; "The Physician's Tale", lns. 7-8, 30-8, p. 190.

³²Matthew of Vendôme *Versification*, p. 44. The female grotesque found literary expression in the Loathly Lady - see for example "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell" in Sands (ed.), *ME Verse Romances*, lns. 231-43, pp. 331-2.

³³Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (London, 1956), p. 11 and passim; idem, *Feminine Beauty* (London, 1980); Arthur Marwick, *Beauty in History: Society, Politics and Personal Appearance c. 1500 to the Present* (London, 1988).

subjectivities on their interpretations³⁴. Others have argued that tastes have altered across time, and that representations of women must be read within their cultural and political contexts³⁵. The representation of the idealised beautiful woman as a slender teenage girl is not a constant across history or cultures. It should be read within the historical context of its production. I see this ideal as an aspect of the wider ideal of maidenhood as the age of consummate femininity.

The conventional beauty of the Pearl Maiden is one aspect of her representation as a youthful, idealised maiden. Her hair is another aspect. It is golden, long, and hangs loose on her shoulders³⁶. Such hair is an element of conventional beauty, but it stands for more than that. Long, uncovered and loose hair had a variety of meanings in late medieval English culture. It could be a sign of uncivilised or anti-social nature, as it is in the images of the hairy wild men and women who sometimes appear in manuscript illuminations³⁷. That sign of wildness could be combined with loose hair as a sign of penitence, as it was in the *vitae* and visual representations of Mary Magdelene in the desert and Mary of

³⁴Marwick fervently denies any political element to perceptions of beauty, despite the blindingly political nature of his own position: "All the complicated talk of politics and power struggles and male conspiracy and oppression seem to me to miss the simple heart of the matter: the sheer uncomplicated joy of going to bed with a beautiful woman", p. 21. Angela Carter suggests an alternative title for Marwick's and Clark's books as "Women I have fancied throughout the ages with additional notes on some of the men I might have fancied if I were a woman" in her review, "I could have fancied her", *London Review of Books* 16 (February 1989).

³⁵Anne Hollander *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York, 1975), argues that the notions of physical beauty in any given age depend on the fashions of the day, as bodies as represented in visual form can be seen to have been shaped by the "ghosts" of their clothing. Margaret Miles discusses the appeal of the virgin's naked breast, and argues that the attraction of the image lay in the breast's association with food and nurture in a time of threatened nutrition (the mid fourteenth century), "The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture" in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.), *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass. 1986).

³⁶The artist who produced the four drawings contained in the manuscript did not precisely follow the description of the Pearl Maiden supplied in the text. In the two illustrations depicting the Pearl Maiden she is shown to have her hair done in plaits and bound up on either side of her head; see *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience and Sir Gawain, Reproduced in Facsimile from the Unique MS. Cotton Nero A.x. in the British Museum*, introduction by I. Gollancz, E.E.T.S. o.s. 162 (1923), ff. 38r and 38v. This style may have been meant as a more realistic than symbolic representation of a maiden, as young unmarried women seem often to have worn their hair up or covered in their daily lives. Loose hair was a recognisable symbol of maidenhood, but that does not mean that all maidens wore their hair down.

³⁷Timothy Husband with Gloria Gilmore, *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism* (New York, 1980).

Egypt³⁸. Hair long enough to cover the body could provide modesty, as it does in the life of Saint Agnes, whose hair grows to cover her nakedness when she is stripped and thrown into a brothel, and in the legend of Lady Godiva³⁹.

Perhaps paradoxically, long loose hair was also a sign of sexual attractiveness and availability, and it was for this reason that early Christian writers demanded that a woman hide her hair under a veil, as traditional Islamic societies still require⁴⁰. The London *Liber Albus* required that the cutting of a prostitute's hair be one aspect of her punishment, and thus of the taming of her sexuality⁴¹. For professed virgins of the middle ages, "taking the veil" was an event within the ritual of consecration, along with the adoption of monastic clothes and the ring by which they were wed to Christ⁴². This ceremony was ritually linked with the secular wedding ceremony, during which a bride would often wear her hair loose and uncovered, and would signal her movement from maidenhood to wifhood by tying up

³⁸For the *vitae* of Mary Magdelene and Mary of Egypt see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, 2 vols. trans William Granger Ryan (Princeton, 1993), vol. 1 pp. 227-9, 374-83. On loose hair as a sign of penitence see Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston, 1989), pp. 48-51. On the hair of Mary Magdelene see Katherine L. French, "The Legend of Lady Godiva and the Image of the Female Body" in *Journal of Medieval History* 18 (1992), 3-19, pp. 15-16.

³⁹For St Agnes see *Golden Legend*, pp. 101-4; For Lady Godiva see French, "Lady Godiva"; Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*, pp. 307-10.

⁴⁰"Every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonereh her head", 1 Corinthians 11.5. "Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?: Doth not even nature itself teach you, that if a man have long hair it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for *her* hair is given to her for a covering", 1 Cor. 11.13-15. The Apostle seems oblivious to the self-contradiction of his statement - that hair must be covered, and that it is in itself a covering. Herein lies a central meaning of women's hair in Christian thought, as at once unseemly and glorious. Tertullian, "On the Veiling of Virgins" in S. Thelwall (ed. and trans.), *The Writings of Tertullian*, 3 vols., vol. 3, Ante-Nicene Christian Library 18 (Edinburgh, 1870), pp. 154-80. See Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, pp. 49-50. On the veiling of women in Islamic culture see Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (1975; London, 1985), pp. 140-5; Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, 1992).

⁴¹*Liber Albus*, p. 395.

⁴²See the orders for the consecration of nuns in J.B.L. Tolhurst (ed.), *The Ordinale and Customary of the Benedictine Nuns of Barking Abbey*, 2 vols., Henry Bradshaw Society 65 and 66 (1927, 1928), vol. 2, pp. 353-55, "Et postea ponat uelamen super caput uirginis dicens. *Accipe uirgo christi uelamen uirginitatis*, p. 354. See also the order of consecration of nuns in William Maskell (ed.), *Monumenta Ritualia Ecclesiae Anglicanae*, 3 vols (London, 1846-7), vol 2, pp. 308-331, "And then shall the bisshop delyver or put uppon yche of theym theyr veyle: saying to every of theym, severally: *Accipe, Christi virgo, velamen uirginitatis et continentiae indicium*", p. 319.

her hair and covering it with a headdress or wimple⁴³ [fig. 2]. While young unmarried women may have often worn their hair bound or covered in practice, as is indicated in some illustrations and tomb brasses, loose uncovered hair remained an instantly recognisable symbol of the state of virginity. Little girls and spinsters alike could be represented with unbound hair on tomb brasses [fig. 3]. Loose hair also played a symbolic role in the coronation of queens, a ritual which bears many similarities to the rituals of consecration and marriage, and was probably meant as a sign of their chastity [figs. 4-6]⁴⁴.

Loose unbound hair signified an apparently contradictory state - the state of sexual attractiveness and availability, and the state of virginity. It therefore stands as the sign *par excellence* of maidenhood - an age in which sexual desirability and the fact of virginity are intermingled. There is a tension, rather than a contradiction within the state of maidenhood. Sexuality and chastity there exist simultaneously. The unbound golden hair of the Pearl Maiden is meant as a sign that she is not meant to be imagined as a sober, respectable woman in her mid thirties, but rather as a perfectly chaste and gloriously desirable maiden, of an age probably somewhere in her teens.

The crown of pearls and flowers which the Maiden wears is another key to her maidenly state. The author of the thirteenth-century exhortation to chastity, *Hali Meidhad*, was stating little more than was conventional in his image of virgins in heaven. They all wear "a circlet shining brighter than the sun, called *aureola* in Latin"⁴⁵. The crown may stand as a symbol of spinsterhood, and thus of permanent virginity in the secular life, as

⁴³Chaucer's Griselda, on her wedding day, has her hair "kembed, that lay untressed/ Ful rudely", "The Clerk's Tale", lns. 379-80, p. 142. See Phillis Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, *Costumes for Births, Marriages and Deaths* (London, 1972), pp. 92-3. Lyndal Roper shows that brides in reformation Augsburg often wore their hair loose until after their weddings, and then adopted wimples, "Going to Church and Street: Weddings in Reformation Augsburg" in *Past and Present* 106 (1985), 62-101, p. 88. Ailsa Holland has shown how the transition from the bride's loose hair to the wife's bound hair and wimple was represented in European art of the fifteenth century, from the Low Countries and France to Italy, "Women's Hair in Fifteenth-Century Art", essay submitted as part of the MA in Medieval Studies, University of York 1990-1. Arnold van Gennep claims that the cutting of hair on the day of marriage symbolises a girl's movement from one age group to another, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabriel L. Caffee (Chicago, 1960) p. 167, and it is possible that the medieval practice is a variant of an ancient one shared by many cultures.

⁴⁴Elizabeth Danbury, "Images of English Queens in the Later Middle Ages" in *The Historian* 46 (1995), 3-9; John Carmi Parsons, "Ritual and Symbol in English Medieval Queenship to 1500" in Louise Olga Fradenburg (ed.), *Women and Sovereignty*, in *Cosmos: The Yearbook of the Traditional Cosmology Society*, vol. 7 (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 62; Joanna Chamberlayne, "Queenship in the Fifteenth Century", unpublished DPhil thesis, University of York, forthcoming.

⁴⁵Translated by Bella Millet and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne as "A Letter on Virginity", in Caedem (eds. and trans.), *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford, 1992), p. 21.

it does in *the Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage*: "Yfe þou wylt no hosbonde have, but wher thy mayden croun"⁴⁶, or of the permanent virginity of the woman professed to the religious life: "Your virginity...will be radiant in a golden diadem"⁴⁷. The crown or circlet is an ancient and extremely widespread symbol, whose origins cannot be established here. Suffice to say that its primary modern association, with royalty, was not its first meaning. It is possible that its later medieval associations with virginity derived from two separate traditions - one of the circlet, crown or wreath as a symbol of marriage, and the other as a symbol of victory.

The crown as both a religious and secular symbol of victory and triumph in the middle ages seems derived from the Greek and Roman wreath, which symbolised the victory of athletes and of military leaders, and became part of the imperial regalia⁴⁸. The symbol passed into Christian religious use before secular, with its adoption as a symbol of victory over death, particularly for martyrs⁴⁹. Coronation became part of royal inauguration in the West in ninth-century Carolingian rituals, and Hincmar of Rheims in the second half of the ninth century was instrumental in the development of the symbolic association of crowns with king-making⁵⁰. The wreath of flowers as a symbol of marriage is, if anything, of much older and more obscure origin, and is perhaps associated primarily with fertility⁵¹. The association of flower garlands with fertility perhaps persisted in the later middle ages with May Day games, which involved gathering flowers and crowning of a May King and Queen, as well as with the custom of brides wearing garlands or circlets on their wedding

⁴⁶*Pilgrimage*, ln. 67, p. 175.

⁴⁷Osbert of Clare, writing to his niece Cecilia, quoted in Barbara Newman, "Flaws in the Golden Bowl: Gender and Spiritual Formation in the Twelfth Century" in *Traditio* 45 (1989-90), 111-46, p. 127.

⁴⁸The wreath as a victor's crown at the ancient Olympic games features in mythology. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1960), vol. 1, pp. 185-7.

⁴⁹Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, 2 vols., trans Janet Seligman (London, 1972), vol. 1, pp. 100-1, 131, 133-4, vol. 2, pp. 5, 106, 108; André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study in its Origins* (London, 1969), p. 41.

⁵⁰Janet L. Nelson, "Inauguration Rituals" in eadem, *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London, 1986), p. 295, rp. from P.H. Sawyer and I.N. Wood (eds.), *Early Medieval Kingship* (Leeds, 1977). I owe this reference to Joel Burden.

⁵¹Graves, *Greek Myths*, vol. 1, pp. 224, 237, 271. Note that men as well as women could wear garlands. See also Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects* (San Francisco, 1988), pp. 132, 155. On the use of crowns or wreaths of flowers during Roman and early medieval marriage rituals see René Metz, "La Couronne et l'Anneau dans la Consécration des Vierges", in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 28 (1954), 113-32, pp. 116-9, rp. in idem, *La Femme et l'Enfant dans le Droit Canonique Médiéval* (London, 1985).

day⁵². The crown of virgins may have been linked to both traditions. It symbolised victory over death through the promise of eternal life, and it signified virginity through its association with marriage and fertility, and thus through the image of the virgin as the bride of Christ⁵³. The Pearl Maiden's crown consisted both of flowers and pearls. The latter were a well-established symbol of purity and virginity by the later middle ages, a symbol played upon by Jacobus de Voragine in his introduction to the life of St Margaret, as the Latin for pearl is *margarita*⁵⁴. The Maiden's white garments also contribute to her representation as pure, innocent and virginal⁵⁵. The pearls, the crown, the loose hair and the white garments combine with the Pearl Maiden's conventional beauty to present a complex yet harmonious image of a woman who combines the most admired feminine traits - chastity, and sexual desirability.

Her appearance in many ways matches that of the virgin martyrs and the Virgin Mary. The virgin martyrs, who were the most popular type of female saint in late medieval England, include Saints Katherine, Margaret, Lucy, Christina, Cecilia, Dorothy, Agnes, Barbara and Agatha⁵⁶. Their *vitae* show individual variants, but have several main themes

⁵²Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 27-31, 115-7; Roper, "Church and Street", p. 88; Cunnington and Lucas, *Costumes*, p. 92.

⁵³Metz, "La Couronne et l'Anneau", argues that the consecration of nuns borrowed symbolism, including that of the wedding crown or wreath, from the Roman and early medieval ritual of marriage.

⁵⁴C.A. Luttrell, "The Medieval Tradition of the Pearl Virginity" in *Medium Ævum* 31 (1962), 194-200; James W. Earl, "Saint Margaret and the Pearl Maiden", *Modern Philology* 70 (1972), 1-8; *Golden Legend* 1, p. 368.

⁵⁵White garments were associated both with the innocence of the child undergoing baptism, and with professed virginity. On baptism see Cunnington and Lucas, *Costumes*, p. 41; Bishop, *Pearl* pp. 114-21. On white clothes as appropriate for professed virgins see Tolhurst (ed.), *Ordinale...Barking Abbey*, p. 353; Margery Kempe's adoption of white clothes, and the Archbishop of York's puzzlement - "Why gost þu in white? Art þu a mayden?", *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. S.B. Meech and H.E. Allen, E.E.T.S. o.s. 212 (1940), pp. 32, 124; see also Mary C. Erler, "Margery Kempe's White Clothes" in *Medium Ævum* 62 (1993), 78-83, and also Dyan Elliott, "Dress as Mediator Between Inner and Outer Self: The Pious Matron of the High and Later Middle Ages" in *Mediaeval Studies* 53 (1991), 279-308, pp. 294-5.

⁵⁶On the popularity of virgin martyrs' lives in general and St Katherine in particular see Katherine J. Lewis, "Rule of lyf alle folk to sewe': Lay Responses to the Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late-Medieval England, 1300-1530", unpublished DPhil thesis, University of York, 1997. See also Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Saints' Lives and the Female Reader" in *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 27 (1991), 314-32; eadem, "The Virgin's Tale" in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (eds.), *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All her Sect* (London, 1994), 165-194; Eamon Duffy, "Holy Maydens, Holy Wyfes: The Cult of Women Saints in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century England" in Sheils and Wood (eds.), *Women in the Church*, pp. 175-196.

in common⁵⁷. The maiden is usually of noble and wealthy background, and is Christian in a predominantly pagan late-classical world. Upon reaching puberty her extraordinary natural beauty becomes apparent, and she is sought after by a powerful pagan suitor. Having pledged both faith and virginity to God, she rejects the advances of the pagan suitor, and is thrown into prison. She undergoes a series of horrible tortures, designed to make her renounce both faith and chastity, but refuses to give up either. Finally she is martyred, usually by beheading. The virginity, steadfastness of will and popularity among women readers of virgin martyrs have received most attention from commentators. Their age has been little mentioned, but I see that as central to their identity as ideal representations of womanhood.

Of those whose actual ages are given in their lives all are in their teens: Agnes is thirteen, Margaret is fifteen, Katherine is eighteen, and Christina is twelve when her torments begin, though she is tortured for fifteen years before her eventual martyrdom⁵⁸. Though we are not told the ages of the others, it seems clear that they too occupy this age of post-pubertal youthful virginity. They must all be of *aetas nubiles* - the legal or actual age of puberty and marriageability - because the plot of each virgin martyr's life hinges on her sexual attractiveness and the efforts of her suitor/tormentor to make her marry him. We are not, therefore, dealing with child saints. The upper limit of their age may also be suggested by their eligibility - they are not spinster saints who have gone beyond the expected age of marriage - and also by the language used to describe them. In the Middle English of Osbern Bokenham's collection they are called "maidens", and the corresponding Latin term in the *Legenda Aurea* is *puella*, not a term likely to be used of a mature woman⁵⁹. Moreover, the lives frequently describe the martyrs as "young" or of "tender age", or as *tenerae puellae* - tender girls. Lucy is "a maydyn yung and delycate"⁶⁰. Agatha is a "damysel ying"⁶¹. Faith is "in hir tendir age"⁶². There can be little doubt that all the virgin

⁵⁷Unless otherwise stated, all references to the lives of the virgin martyrs are taken from the translation of *The Golden Legend* by William Granger Ryan. The lives of Margaret, Christina, Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins, Faith, Agnes, Dorothy, Katherine, Cecilia, Agatha and Lucy are also contained in Bokenham's mid fifteenth-century *Legendys*.

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

⁵⁹Jacobi a Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Graesse, e.g. pp. 400, 791, etc.

⁶⁰Bokenham, *Legendys*, p. 254.

⁶¹Bokenham, *Legendys* p. 232.

martyrs would have been perceived to be young women occupying the maidenhood stage of the life cycle.

According to medieval authors on the resurrection, Christ died at thirty-three because he had reached the peak of his life, and it would not have been appropriate for Christ to experience physical decline⁶³. Is it possible that the virgin martyrs died in their teens because that was the peak of the lives of their feminine bodies? It seems relevant to note that, in regard to healthy reproduction, Aristotle had argued that the perfect age for women at marriage was eighteen, while for men it was thirty-six, and the *De Regimine Principium* kept Aristotle's perfect age for women, though it lowered that of men⁶⁴. The idea that a woman's later teenage years represented a feminine physical ideal went beyond natural philosophy and eugenics, and entered the widely disseminated representations of women saints.

The late medieval rewriting of the life of St Apollonia may be singled out as illustrative of my theory that youthfulness is a key attribute of feminine perfection. In earlier lives, including the thirteenth-century *Legenda Aurea*, she is an aging deaconess, whom Jacobus de Voragine calls "an admirable virgin, well along in years"⁶⁵. But by the later middle ages in England she is represented visually as a young maiden, alongside youthful martyrs such as Agnes⁶⁶. Increasingly, youth was becoming a necessary element of ideal femininity.

The virgin martyrs do not wear the white clothes of the Pearl Maiden, but in visual representations they all share her conventional beauty, her long loose golden hair, and, in many cases, her crown or garland [figs. 7-10]. Bokenham's description of the beauty of Margaret when first seen by the prefect Olibrius is particularly notable for its engagement with courtly ideals of feminine beauty:

And whan he sey hyr forheed lely-whyht,
Hyr bent browys blake, & hyr grey eyne,

⁶²Bokenham, *Legendys*, p. 99.

⁶³See Burrow, *Ages of Man*, p. 143.

⁶⁴See above, p. 63.

⁶⁵*Golden Legend* 1, p. 268.

⁶⁶David Hugh Farmer (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, 1992), p. 28. For a visual example of St. Apollonia represented alongside and resembling the other virgin martyrs see the reproduction of the south rood screen at Westhall Church, East Anglia in Duffy, "Holy Maydens", p. 183, pl. 2. I owe the example of Apollonia to Katherine Lewis.

Hyr chyry Chekys, hyr nose streyt & ryht,
 Hyr lyppys rody, hyr chyn, wych as pleyne
 Pulshyd marbyl shoon, & clovyn in tweyne⁶⁷.

This matches perfectly the courtly literary ideal of feminine beauty described above. It seems apparent from Bokenham's allusions to both Geoffrey of Vinsauf and Matthew of Vendôme elsewhere within the life that his appeal to secular courtly ideals is quite consciously made, and that the reader was meant to imagine Margaret on the same terms as the sexually desirable secular ideal⁶⁸. The conventional beauty of the virgin martyrs is significant as it clearly indicates that these saints were not meant to be conceived of in sexually neutral terms, nor that through their virginity they had "become men". Not only were they represented in uncompromisingly female form, they fit the image of the desirable ideal⁶⁹.

The unbound hair of the virgin martyrs in visual representations takes on the same meanings as it does for the Pearl Maiden - of the woman who is both desired and untouched. The symbolism of the crowns which they often wear is a little more complex. As with the Pearl Maiden, they symbolise virginity and dedication to Christ, as shown by the example of Cecilia and her chaste husband Valerian, to whom angels offer crowns of roses as signs of their chastity⁷⁰. But they are also crowns of martyrdom - a significant aspect of the early Christian iconographic meanings of the crown⁷¹. Peter Abelard in the twelfth century had written of the double crown of the virgin martyrs: of lilies for virginity, and of roses for martyrdom⁷². In the case of St Katherine, a royal princess, the crown also

⁶⁷Bokenham, *Legendys*, p. 13.

⁶⁸Bokenham, *Legendys*, pp. 12, 32.

⁶⁹Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, argues that feminine beauty was always problematic within medieval Christianity because of its threat to male chastity, and that the mutilation experienced by the virgin martyrs before martyrdom may be read as part of the discourse of the grotesque, pp. 70-1, 156. I feel this is something of a simplification, and that Miles is too quick to dismiss the significance of the appeal of the virgin martyrs to the heterosexual male viewer. It must be significant that the mutilations which they experience are not the cause of their martyrdoms, but instead are miraculously healed. Their beauty is thus not diminished before death, which usually takes place by beheading. Veronica Sekules notes the convention of representing holy women as beautiful, and suggests that this, along with their riches, is meant to convey to the viewer an idea of their sanctity which is conveyed through earthly notions of superiority, "Women and Art in England in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries" in Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski (eds.), *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200-1400* (London, 1987), p. 43.

⁷⁰*Golden Legend* 2, p. 319.

⁷¹Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, p. 41.

⁷²Cited in Newman, "Golden Bowl", p. 123.

points to regal status. Yet the significance of the crown or wreath as a symbol of virginity which is youthful and potentially fertile remains, and is appropriate to the virgin martyrs' life cycle stage.

Representations of the Virgin Mary in English visual sources also hint at the identification of women's youth with their perfect age. Unlike her son, tradition had it that she lived on well into old age, and thus well past the perfect age of the body⁷³. Voragine's account of the Assumption of the Virgin says that she was fourteen when she conceived Christ and fifteen when she gave birth to him - that is, at the perfect age of woman according to my argument - then after his death at thirty-three she survived him by twenty-four years, thus dying at the age of seventy-two. He says another account gives her age at death as sixty⁷⁴. In either case, at the assumption she is, in human years, an elderly woman.

Turning to visual representation of the Virgin's assumption and coronation, one might expect to find her represented as an old woman, if the artists concerned took a naturalistic course. Alternatively, given the theology of perfect age and the resurrection of the body, one might expect to find her in a thirty-three year old body. How would a thirty-three year old married woman be represented in this late medieval English context? She would almost certainly be wimpled, with her hair bound up, and perhaps would have a slightly matronly figure - in short, perhaps she would look a little like traditional representations of St Anne [fig. 11]. Representations of Mary during the assumption, and the coronation, do not depict any such a matronly figure [figs. 12-13]. Rather, like the Pearl Maiden and virgin martyrs, she is a maiden, who as queen of heaven has the unbound hair and crown of a maiden on her wedding day. Depictions of the coronation are particularly illustrative of my theme, as they depict a mother who looks considerably younger than her son. The bearded, stately and sombre figure of Christ is representative of the perfect age of man, and the demure, pretty, youthful and maidenly figure of Mary is representative of the perfect age of woman [fig. 14].

Mary's representation is slightly more complex than those of the Pearl Maiden or virgin martyrs. Thus, for example, while she too is a conventional beauty with flowing

⁷³*The Golden Legend* 2, p. 78 provides an account of the Virgin's biography. See also Peter Meredith (ed.), *The Mary Play from the N Town Manuscript* (London, 1987).

⁷⁴*Golden Legend* 2, p. 78.

golden hair⁷⁵, she is often depicted with a light veil over her hair. This may be meant to signify her state as both virgin and wife - with the unbound hair of the former and the seemly, concealing veil of the latter. Also, her crown and the theme of her coronation hold slightly different meanings than they do for the others. While the theme of "Maria Regina", or the Virgin as queen, dates to the sixth century, the theme of the act of the coronation of the virgin dates from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries⁷⁶. It is argued that through this iconography the Virgin is represented in the role of royal intercessor, who shared in Christ's power over heaven and earth and could be called upon by believers to intercede in earthly affairs⁷⁷.

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

⁷⁵On the virgin's later medieval resemblance to courtly beauties see Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 220-41.

⁷⁶On the iconography of the Virgin as Queen see Rosemary Muir Wright, "The Virgin in the Sun and in the Tree" in Fradenburg (ed.), *Women and Sovereignty*; Marina Warner, *A lone of all her Sex*, pp. 81-117; Engelbert Kirschbaum, *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie* (Rome, 1970), cols. 671-5, s.v. "Krönung Mariens". Bruce Bernard, *The Queen of Heaven: A Selection of Paintings of the Virgin Mary from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1987), pls. 160-4 provide late medieval (non-English) examples of the youthful, blonde, crowned Virgin.

⁷⁷See Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Marian Devotion in the Western Church" in Jill Raitt (ed.), *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, vol. 17 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedia of the Religious Quest* (New York, 1987), pp. 405-10. Before her role as queen of heaven and intercessor Mary's main identities had been ethereal virgin and spiritual mediatrix.

Virginity Desired

In arguing that maidenhood as a stage in women's life cycle represented the perfect age of women, I have pointed to aspects of femininity which were most fully desirable. The abstracted feminine ideal - as opposed to the practical feminine ideal discussed in the previous chapter - combined the twin elements of virginity and erotic appeal. I have so far avoided the question of context. By whom was this ideal constructed, and for whom? Who regarded the maiden as an object of desire? These questions will be considered here, as part of a broader analysis of the notion that virginity was valuable and desirable. Why, and how, did virginity come to be an ideal of femininity, even erotic in some contexts? There are two strands to this answer, as there are two main strands to the ideology of virginity. The first is the theological strand, which considered the ideal of virginity as the highest human state. The second is the social strand, which considered virginity to be a necessity for girls before marriage. Both of these will be considered here, but with more attention to the latter, as it has received less attention from medievalists, and because it opens up a much wider debate regarding the position of women in late medieval English society.

i. Theological virginity

The notion of virginity as the highest human state, with widowhood and marriage coming behind in second and third places, persisted throughout the middle ages from the time of its conception by St Jerome⁷⁸. Where marriage would receive a thirty-fold reward, and chaste widowhood a sixty-fold reward, virginity would receive a hundred-fold reward⁷⁹. The precise meaning of virginity, and the reasons for its value, were subject to intense discussion amongst medieval theologians, and also among modern scholars. The latter have focused on some key questions. Was virginity primarily a matter of the body, or of the will? Did forced intercourse entail loss of virginity? Was virginity an ungendered concept, or did it come to be linked most forcefully with femininity?

Scholars who have concentrated on the elite discourse of theology have tended to

⁷⁸St Jerome, "Against Jovinian" in W.H. Fremantle (ed. and trans.), *The Principle Works of St Jerome*, Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 6 (Oxford, 1893), pp. 346-416. See Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto etc., 1993), pp. 170-3, 175-8. On the tradition in later medieval England see Bella Millett (ed.), *Hali Meidhad*, E.E.T.S. o.s. 284 (1982), pp. xxxviii-xxxix.

⁷⁹Jerome, *A gainst Jovinian*, p. 347; Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, pp. 175-6. Jerome's calculations are based on the parable of the sower, Matthew 13:23. Chaucer put the theme into the mouth of his Parson, in "The Parson's Tale", p. 322.

conclude that virginity was, above all, a matter of the will, that a violated virgin was still considered a virgin, and that virginity was a concept which applied equally to religious ideals of masculinity and femininity. Peter Brown's work on the development of the ideal of chastity - which, he cautions, deals with ideas quite different from those which would develop in later Christian centuries - emphasises that to embark on permanent chastity was to step away from social pressures and sensual drives, and through this exertion of will to enable a mediation between God and man, a link between heavenly perfection and earthly existence. Such an ideal belonged equally to women and men⁸⁰. Foucault's discussion of early monasticism makes the idea of chastity as a form of self-governance over the flesh his focus⁸¹. Pierre Payer perhaps goes furthest, in his recent study in which the renunciation of sexuality is characterised as a reining in of impulses, the bridling of desire by means of self-control⁸². He argues that later medieval theologians did not insist on physical intactness as a mark of virginity, but rather that virginity was the state of a body in which sexual relations had never taken place with consent or pleasure⁸³. While his argument that rape of virgins does not destroy their virginity through rupture of the hymen implies a gendered element to his interpretation, he makes no overt allusion to the notion that virginity was gendered feminine by the later middle ages.

Other scholars have made more of the gendered aspect of later medieval virginity. John Bugge describes the process by which virginity became "sexualised" through the development of the theme of the virgin as the bride of Christ and the theme's usual association with female virgins⁸⁴. Barbara Newman, Clarissa Atkinson and Jocelyn Wogan-

⁸⁰Peter Brown, "The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church" in Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (eds.), *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 16 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (London, 1986), 427-43; idem, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), passim.

⁸¹Michel Foucault, "The Battle For Chastity" in Philippe Ariès and André Bejin (eds.), *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, trans. Anthony Forster (Oxford, 1985).

⁸²Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, passim.

⁸³Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, pp. 162-5. The belief that a raped woman has not lost her chastity derives from St Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, 1972), caps. 16-19, pp. 26-31.

⁸⁴John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague, 1975), esp. pp. 92-110.

Browne all comment on the late medieval tendency to link virginity and the female sex⁸⁵. Newman and Atkinson discuss the imagery of virginity - the golden bowl, the fragile glass - which suggests a notion of virginity primarily concerned with physical intactness, and Wogan-Browne, though she acknowledges that chaste wives and widows could be made honorary virgins, asserts that an intact hymen remained the *sine qua non* as a mark of virginity⁸⁶. Atkinson's argument is that spiritual chastity gained ground on the intact hymen as a sign of "virginity" by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and that sexually experienced women such as Elizabeth of Hungary, Bridget of Sweden and Margery Kempe were able to claim the hundred-fold reward as honorary, though not actual, virgins⁸⁷. Yet I would agree with Wogan-Browne, that while physical intactness was not in theory necessary for a hundred-fold reward, still it remained the pre-eminent sign of the perfect state of humanity. Virginity could be made honorary in certain instances, but it in itself remained the key to perfection. The states of marriage and motherhood did not replace virginity as the state deserving of the greatest reward. The arguments of those such as Payer, and of the medieval theologians of his study, must be seen as very much the theory of virginity rather than the practice. Theologians from Augustine to Aquinas may have insisted that a raped woman did not lose her virginity, but if that argument were convincing then why do we have no women saints who are raped yet retain their virginities? The evidence from late medieval English law and literature examined in Chapter Three indicates a firm belief within the culture that a raped woman did indeed lose her virginity, and thus brought shame upon her house.

The ideology of virginity did not consist of one single message within this culture, yet it may be possible to assert that there were certain messages which predominated. That is, that virginity was not only a matter of self-control and spiritual purity, but that it entailed physical intactness. The necessity for physical intactness implies a notion of virginity which is primarily associated with women, and, indeed, it does seem that by this period virginity, even within theological discourse, is characterised most often as an aspect of femininity. Moreover, the conventions by which virginity is marked, within textual and

⁸⁵Newman, "Golden Bowl", p. 123; Clarissa Atkinson, "'Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass': The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages" in *Journal of Family History* 8 (1983), 131-143, p. 133; Wogan-Browne, "Virgin's Tale", p. 166; eadem, "Chaste Bodies: Frames and Experiences" in Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (eds.), *Framing Medieval Bodies* (Manchester, 1994), 24-42, p. 24.

⁸⁶Wogan-Browne, "Virgin's Tale", p. 168.

⁸⁷Atkinson, "Precious Balsam", pp. 139-142.

visual contexts, most often associate virginity with youthful maidens. Thus, as discussed above, the virgin martyrs and the Virgin Mary appear youthful and beautiful. The virgins of *Hali Meidhad*, and those whom Margery Kempe envies, are envisaged dancing merrily in heaven, an image which calls to mind the youthful earthly maidens who danced on their holidays⁸⁸. The state of virginity, which was the most worthy of all human states, thus was strongly associated with femaleness, youth, beauty, and physical intactness in late medieval culture. Maidenhood as a stage in women's life cycle may be seen as the perfect age of woman's life in part because of its connections with the theological ideal of the perfect state of humanity.

The question of by whom this ideal was constructed, and for whom, is not easily answered. If it were a masculine dominant discourse which controlled the representation, then the ideal of the woman who is at once ripe for fertility, and yet remains virginally untouched, could have been produced out of a male heterosexual desire which focused on perpetually delayed gratification. This theory points most obviously at the male cleric as the male heterosexual for whom the virgin could be an object of desire. In a context in which the usual life cycle of flesh is, though not contemptible, at least relatively problematic, then the female body engaged in sexual activity, childbirth, lactation and aging cannot answer to the ideals of a life in which sensual experiences are repressed⁸⁹. But why, then, should the image of the post-pubertal virgin have become such a powerful image of femininity as to appeal to both males who were not celibates, and to women in general? The ubiquity of the images of the Virgin Mary in particular, and the virgin martyrs and courtly heroines as well, suggests that the maidenly ideal had an appeal far wider than simply for celibate males.

The answer must be that the cult of virginity - where virginity was associated with femininity - had a power which could override the immediate interests of women and secular men. The power of any dominant discourse is that it can appear appealing even to those who do not obviously benefit from it. This explanation is particularly useful as an

⁸⁸"A Letter on Virginity" in Millett and Wogan-Browne (eds. and trans.), *Prose for Women*, p. 19; *Pilgrimage*, lns. 19-29, p. 173. On the appeal of dancing maidens, see Alan J. Fletcher, "The Dancing Virgins of *Hali Meidhad*" in *Notes and Queries* n.s. 40 (1993), 437-9.

⁸⁹Jerome said "Women with child offer a revolting spectacle", Letter 107, in Fremantle (ed.), *Principle Works of St Jerome*, p. 194, and the author of *Hali Meidhad* provides a description of the woes of pregnancy and childbirth which seems to share some of this disgust, Millett and Wogan-Browne (eds. and trans.), "A Letter on Virginity" in *Prose for Women*, pp. 31-2. See Miles, *Camal Knowing*, ch. 5, on the female body as grotesque in medieval Christianity, and Phillips, "Aesthetics of Virginity", pp. 12-13.

indication of why the young virgin could be an ideal image for women, rather than a disliked symbol of clerical incapacity to cope with their physical nature. There is no reason to suppose that resistance was an inbuilt response of women when faced with representations of ideal femininity which might appear to us to be objects only of male desire. As Foucault says, "Power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression"⁹⁰. The power of the image of the maiden as an ideal of femininity was that it simultaneously celebrated and denigrated the female body, and thus simultaneously drew female spectators into an appreciation of the object while disparaging the bodily processes experienced by such women, who, on the whole, did not represent the state of the eternal promise of fertile virginity.

The path by which the post-pubertal virgin came to represent the peak of femininity cannot, however, be accounted for only in terms of the elite culture of theology. The appeal of the young virgin had social meanings beyond the theological, which indeed preceded the clerical ideal of the virginal young woman and may thus have contributed to that ideal's formation. The social ideology which states that virginity is a necessity in girls before their marriage goes far beyond medieval culture, or even European culture most generally. It is so ancient, so ubiquitous, that it has almost escaped analysis. It is taken as a given by scholars of medieval culture, who have focused almost all their interest in the subject of virginity in its theological aspect. The emphasis on the study of perpetual, as opposed to premarital, virginity has been so powerful that an anthropologist of Samoa sees the kind of virginity conceptualised within traditional Samoan culture as bearing no similarities to the conception of virginity within traditional Christian societies:

A taupou⁹¹ then was a sexually mature *virgo intacta* of rank. Her virginity was distinctively different from the virginity valued within Christendom. The Christian ideal, which stemmed from the musings of Gregory of Nyssa and others on the prelapsarian virginity of Adam and Eve, aspired to an asexual mode of existence and the overcoming of all concupiscence in the interests of a total identification with the risen Christ. The Samoan taupou, in contrast, was an engaging young lady of rank, enchantingly erotic in her very virginity, which in the eyes of Samoans gave her unique value, it being an ineluctable fact that a maiden's virginity can be

⁹⁰Michel Foucault, "Body/Power" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972-77*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (Brighton, 1980), p. 59.

⁹¹A taupou is the daughter of a high ranking villager - often a chief - and plays the role of ceremonial hostess within the village.

given up but once. And so, young chieftains would vie for the special prestige associated with the deflowering of a taupou⁹².

I see the kind of virginity valued within late medieval English society as not markedly different from, but indeed remarkably similar to, Freeman's account of Samoan virginity. In late medieval England too, premarital chastity was a requirement for girls from a range of different social ranks, though not necessarily all, and was not merely a requirement but a major element of their sexual appeal. This fundamental element of young medieval womanhood merits analysis within its social and economic context, rather than as well as within the realm of religious ideology. A consideration of the relationship between the ideology of virginity and its relationship to material social circumstances will be offered here. No firm solutions will be offered, but rather some suggestions as to ways in which the topic might be further explored.

ii. *Social virginity*

In giving evidence to the York consistory court in 1453, one John Russell deposes that he has often heard Sir John Collom (vicar of Garton-on-the-Wolds) say that one Robert Chew had deflowered (*defloravit*) Isabella Alan, a blood relative of the vicar, and because of the deflowering had left her twenty marks from his purse to spend⁹³. His deposition is in response to an article querying whether or not Robert Chew and Isabella Alan had known each other carnally. The intention of the court is to determine whether Robert Chew had made a valid marriage with one Agnes Cosen, who was related to Isabella Alan in the fourth degree. Through sexual intercourse with Isabella prior to the marriage, it is argued, Robert had established an affinity between himself and Agnes which provided a legal bar to a valid marriage. The details supplied by John Russell regarding the financial arrangement between Robert Chew and Isabella Alan are not, strictly speaking, required as evidence. Indeed, several other deponents simply reply in the affirmative that Robert had known Agnes carnally, with no further information. The inclusion of these details thus provides a fortuitous, almost accidental, glimpse into the meanings and values surrounding the premarital virginity of a particular young woman.

The virginity of Isabella Alan, who seems to belong to the class of substantial

⁹²Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa*, p. 229.

⁹³B.I.H.R. CP. F 189.

peasantry along with the other participants in the case⁹⁴, is given a considerable monetary value. Twenty marks is £13 6s. 8d. The value of the compensation paid Isabella for the loss of her virginity can be placed in perspective if compared with aspects of the fifteenth-century cost of living in England. Christopher Dyer notes that in the 1436 income tax assessment, 6,200 families registered incomes of between £5 and £39 per annum. Five pounds was the taxable minimum. Dyer feels that many of these families would have belonged to the yeoman and merchant classes. He also notes Sir John Fortescue's claim that £5 was a "fair living for a yeoman", and that a fully employed carpenter would have earned as much, while at least £10 a year was necessary to support a gentleman⁹⁵. Robert Chew, therefore, had given Isabella the equivalent of rather more than a fairly comfortable annual income. To gain some idea of what twenty marks might buy, we may note Dyer's claim that in the early fifteenth century a lord might have spent between £2 and £7 to build a house for tenants (costs calculated based on the costs of materials and wages, the lower estimate more likely where timbers were re-used), and that ordinarily a "peasant" would require £2-3 to build a three bay building⁹⁶. Costs may, however, have been slightly higher than this in North Yorkshire, where, it has been suggested, the expense of providing houses with slate roofs pushed prices up. One peasant house in Bedale in the second quarter of the fifteenth century cost £11 3s. 9d., while another was cheaper at £4 15s. 6d⁹⁷. In either case, Isabella's payment was large enough to cover such costs. She may also have had enough left over to furnish the house. In an inventory dated 1457 the contents of the house of an insubstantial peasant are valued at 15s. 5d., while a mid-fourteenth century inventory of a wealthy peasant (a reeve) the contents are valued at 27s. 11½ d.⁹⁸. Even allowing for inflation in the latter instance, this evidence suggests that the price of Isabella Alan's virginity would have been enough to pay for and furnish a house for a member of the

⁹⁴There is no direct evidence for the social status of the participants in the case. It may be inferred that they are agriculturalists because of their places of residence (villages near Driffield on the Yorkshire wolds). That they are substantial rather than minor peasantry seems implied by the large sum paid Isabella, and by the evidence that the family of Robert Chew's bride have a bakehouse on their property (deposition of Robert Kirkeby).

⁹⁵Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 31-2.

⁹⁶Dyer, *Standards of Living*, p. 167.

⁹⁷Christopher Dyer, "English Peasant Buildings in the Late Middle Ages (1200-1500)" in *Medieval Archaeology* 30 (1986), 19-45, p. 33.

⁹⁸Dyer, *Standards of Living*, p. 170, table 15.

substantial peasantry, the social group from which she probably derived.

This example indicates how serious a matter a woman's loss of her virginity could be. The money payment in compensation for that loss suggests that Isabella's eligibility had been seriously damaged, and that the resultant insecurity of her future had to be made good by a money payment which might either overcome her loss of marital value or provide financial help in living as a single woman. Such payments of compensation for loss of virginity may have been unusual, though historical documentation may simply be lacking. The example of Isabella Alan is available to us by happy accident. To what extent, though, should her experience be seen as particular, and to what extent is it indicative of more general experience? How far should one limit the ideology connecting a woman's chastity to economic value to specific social groups? Is premarital chastity linked primarily to her gender identity, or to her class identity? In other words, do considerations of gender and class intersect, overlap, or operate separately in regard to the issue of premarital virginity?

This discussion of such questions does not propose to offer definitive solutions, but rather to suggest some ways in to the topic. The stages to be followed here will be firstly, to recognise that the relationship between women's chastity and social conditions constitutes a problem to be examined; secondly, to suggest a basic premise regarding that relationship; thirdly, to outline a possible methodological approach to the topic; and fourthly, to take tentative steps towards applying that methodology to evidence concerning different social groups, and to see what fragmentary results that application turns up. The specific questions to be considered are far larger than can adequately be tackled here, but the results of the investigation may constitute an early step toward a deeper understanding of the ideologies of respectable behaviour as they applied to young women, and a recognition that, ultimately, the ideals of femininity which operated within different social groups were based in material circumstances.

The first step, then, is to recognise that there is a problem to be solved. Premarital chastity has earned little analysis from medieval historians. This may be because the phenomenon is far from unique to medieval culture, and indeed has not entirely disappeared from our own culture. It is therefore necessary to point out that there is nothing natural about the phenomenon, but rather that it is socially constructed. Here it seems that a broadly anthropological approach is useful. Anthropologists, compared with historians, seem less inclined to ignore the necessity for girls' premarital chastity in the cultures of their

study⁹⁹. One way in which a broadly anthropological approach can help in an analysis of apparent norms is to show the role of culture in creating such "norms". We can unravel the cultural construction of much of what seems normal, or even natural, by tracing the stages of its construction, and thus rendering the resulting norm alien, peculiar, and open to analysis. The necessity for virginity in girls before marriage is one such norm which may thus be opened up to examination.

The cultural construct to be unravelled here will be the creation of the imperforate hymen as a "natural" physical feature, and ultimate sign of virginity. The role of culture in the construction of the body has been explored in recent scholarship by many authors, such as Thomas Laqueur and Judith Butler¹⁰⁰. Their studies have concentrated on the construction of sexed bodies generally, but it is possible to apply a similar approach to particular features of the body. That the hymen is to some extent a product of particular historical contexts is an idea which has been explored by Giulia Sissa, Esther Lastique and Helen Rodnite Lemay, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, the first with a focus on ancient Greek medical ideas and the others on high to late medieval theological and medical ideas¹⁰¹. The process of the construction of the hymen as an intact seal will be examined here, but also, more importantly, the question of why that construction took place.

The idea that virginity is particularly important in girls, rather than boys, is given physical justification through the social construction of the hymen. Female virginity is thus reified, given physical actuality, in the membrane. Recent medical literature holds that the

⁹⁹See for the example the interest shown by anthropologists in premarital chastity in Samoa: Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, pp. 74-85; Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa*; Bradd Shore, "Sexuality in Samoa: Conceptions and Missed Conceptions" and Sherry B. Ortner, "Gender and Sexuality in Hierarchical Societies: The Case of Polynesia and Some Comparative Implications", both in Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (eds.), *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1981). See also Ortner's more general, theoretical essay, "The Virgin and the State" in *Feminist Studies* 4 (1978), 19-37.

¹⁰⁰Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge Mass., 1990); Butler, *Gender Trouble*, part 3, and eadem, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993).

¹⁰¹Giulia Sissa, "Maidenhood without Maidenhead: The Female Body in Ancient Greece" in David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton, 1990). See the same author's *Greek Virginity*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge Mass., 1990); Esther Lastique and Helen Rodnite Lemay, "A Medieval Physician's Guide to Virginity" in Joyce E. Salisbury (ed.), *Sex in the Middle Ages. A Book of Essays* (New York and London, 1991); Wogan-Browne, "Virgin's Tale", p. 168 and p.187, n. 16. Ann Ellis Hanson in her article "The Medical Writers' Woman", also in Halperin et. al., contends against Sissa that ancient Greek medical and literary texts *do* ascribe a physical actuality to female virginity, but she does not disprove - indeed agrees with - Sissa's argument that there is no notion of the hymen as a membrane across the virginal vagina in such texts, pp. 324-330.

hymen is the flesh surrounding the vaginal entrance - that is, more a ring than a barrier - which is present in baby and little girls, but which takes different forms and is present in different sizes, and is frequently broken down during childhood or early adolescence by physical activity¹⁰². The imperforate hymen does exist, but is a rare medical condition, where the hymen completely covers the entrance to the vagina and must be broken when the girl reaches puberty to facilitate her menstrual flow. For many or most women the hymen is broken down to a greater or lesser extent before first intercourse, and thus the first sexual experience may or may not be painful, and there may or may not be any resultant bleeding. The idea of the hymen which seals the virginal female body is a cultural construct which serves the purpose of making female virginity seem more physically significant than it actually is¹⁰³.

Within medieval medical and other literature, it is possible to note the development of the idea of the hymen as a membrane sealing the vagina. The metaphors which medieval theological or clerical texts use to refer to virginity imply that the virgin's body is literally closed¹⁰⁴. In the fourth century Ambrose, a champion of the notion of the Virgin Mary's perpetual virginity, interpreted a verse from Ezekiel in terms of the virgin birth. The verse refers to a closed gate: "Then the lord said unto me; This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it, therefore it shall be shut" (Ez. 44.2). Ambrose wrote:

What is this gate but Mary, closed because she is a virgin? Mary is the gate through which Christ entered the world, when he was born by a virgin birth, without opening the genital seal. The barrier of modesty

¹⁰²Roger Warwick and Peter L. Williams (eds.), *Gray's Anatomy* (35th edn; Edinburgh, 1973), pp. 1363-4; The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *The New Our Bodies Ourselves: A Book By and For Women* (New York, 1984), p. 206. The latter provides a diagram showing the different forms which the hymen may take in different girls, from a near-covering of the vagina to virtual non-existence.

¹⁰³It is possible that the practice of infibulation is an extreme form of the cultural construction of physical virginity. This is the most severe form of female genital mutilation, and is practised in many sub-Saharan countries. The cultures in which infibulation is practised place a high premium of female premarital chastity, and believe women to be naturally oversexed and thus in need of protection from their own impulses. See Efua Dorkenoo and Scilla Elworthy, *Female Genital Mutilation: Proposals for Change*, Minority Rights Group International, Report (London, 1992).

¹⁰⁴Of course, theological concepts of virginity could go beyond the idea of physical intactness. St Augustine argued that women who had been raped could not be said to have lost their virginity thereby, *City of God*, esp. cap. 18, pp. 27-8. Atkinson, "Precious Balsam", explores the background to the idea of virginity of spirit rather than of flesh, and provides a convincing argument that the latter concept gained in acceptance in the later middle ages. Wogan-Browne, "The Virgin's Tale", agrees that integrity of spirit could be as highly valued as integrity of flesh, but rather than following the long-term chronological change suggested by Atkinson finds that "technical intactness can be written in and out as needed", p. 168.

remained intact and the seals of virginity were preserved¹⁰⁵

Ambrose's closed gate finds a parallel in Jerome's "garden enclosed", from Solomon 4:12, "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed", in his powerful advocacy of the celibate life¹⁰⁶. Images of sealing, intactness, are found in the twelfth century, with Hildegard of Bingen's assertion that "the bride of [Christ]...is always whole"¹⁰⁷. Clarissa Atkinson and Barbara Newman point to twelfth- and thirteenth-century uses of images of golden vessels or fragile glasses to refer to the wholeness of virginity, notably Aelred of Rievaulx's metaphor of a virgin's flesh as an earthen vessel in which gold is stored and if cracked and the gold spilled then no repair is possible, while the author of the *Ancrene Riwe* said of virginity that "this frail vessel is as fragile as any glass" and repeated Aelred's statement that the glass once broken could not be mended¹⁰⁸. Thus from biblical exegesis and the notion of Mary's perpetual virginity sprang a notion of physical virginity based in literal wholeness, in a physical seal which completely closed the virginal body.

The idea of a physical barrier had, by the late middle ages, also gained authority through medical texts. In Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' *De Secretis Mulierum*, probably composed in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, a chapter entitled "On the signs of corruption of virginity" claims that one reason for women's pain at first intercourse "is that there is a certain skin in the vagina and the bladder which is broken"¹⁰⁹. Two sixteenth-century commentaries on this passage are more explicit, the first (from the 1580 Lyons edition) explaining that "the vagina of a virgin is always closed, but a woman's is always open, therefore a virgin voids her urine higher up than a virgin does", while the second (from the 1508 Venice edition) notes that "all virgins, when they first consort with men,

¹⁰⁵St Ambrose, *De Institutione Virginie* 52, in J.P. Migne (ed.) *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1844-64), vol. 16, col. 319. See Brown, *Body and Society*, pp. 354-6.

¹⁰⁶St Jerome, "To Eustochium" in Charles Christopher Mierow (trans.), *The Letters of St Jerome* vol. 1 (Westminster, MD, 1963); On the imagery of virginity as a closed garden see Brian E. Daley, "The 'Closed Garden' and the 'Sealed Fountain': Song of Songs 4:12 in the Late Medieval Iconography of Mary" in Elizabeth B. MacDougall (ed.), *Medieval Gardens*, *Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture IX* (Washington D.C., 1986).

¹⁰⁷Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York, 1990), p. 83.

¹⁰⁸Atkinson, "Precious Balsam", pp. 137-8; Newman, "Golden Bowl", pp. 123-4; M.B. Salu (ed. and trans.), *The Ancrene Riwe* (London, 1963), p. 72.

¹⁰⁹Pseud.-Alb. Magnus, *De Sec. Mul.*, cap. ix, pp. 126-7.

have a certain membrane broken, called the hymen, and this is the guardian of virginity"¹¹⁰. Similar ideas were expressed by Mondino de' Luzzi in the fourteenth century, who claimed that "the surface [of the entrance to the womb] is in virgins covered by a subtle and venous membrane; at the moment of deflowering, it breaks, and women bleed", and by Michael Savonarola in the fifteenth century who said "the cervix is covered by a subtle membrane called the *hymen*, which is broken at the time of deflowering, so that the blood flows"¹¹¹.

This idea of the unbroken hymen as a membrane across the vaginal entrance was rather new at the end of the middle ages. Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset note that the Salernitan writers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries did not mention it¹¹². Other early and high medieval commentators describe veins at the entrance to the vagina which break during first intercourse or on the insertion of fingers, but the idea of the hymen as an intact membrane was slow to develop¹¹³. To gain a broad sense of the long development of physiological ideas it is useful to consider the arguments of Giulia Sissa. She claims that ancient Greek medical writing and other literature make no mention of the membrane of the hymen, and that neither Aristotle nor Galen, despite their usual exhaustiveness, ever describe a part of the anatomy which could be identified as the hymen. Nor is there any mention of the hymenial membrane in the anatomic Hippocratic writings¹¹⁴. Soranus of Ephesus went a step closer to the later position, when in his lengthy account of the physical signs of female virginity (a constricted and narrow vagina with furrows containing blood vessels which are torn with the stretching of defloration) he asserts that it is a "mistake" to assume that a thin membrane grows across the vagina, and that this membrane causes pain when it bursts in defloration or if menstruation occurs too quickly¹¹⁵. Sissa claims that this is the first mention of a virginal hymen in any Greek medical literature which she has

¹¹⁰Pseud.-Alb. Magnus, *De Sec. Mul.*, cap. ix, pp. 126-7.

¹¹¹Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, 1988), p. 44.

¹¹²Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, p. 44. See also the extensive translations in George W. Corner, *Anatomical Texts of the Earlier Middle Ages: A Study in the Transmission of Culture* (Washington, 1927).

¹¹³Lastique and Lemay, "Guide to Virginity", pp. 59-60.

¹¹⁴Sissa, "Maidenhood without Maidenhead", pp. 352-354.

¹¹⁵Soranus, *Gynecology*, ed. and trans. Oswei Temkin (Baltimore, 1956), pp. 15-17.

seen. There are, she says, references in Soranus and the Hippocratic *Diseases of Women*¹¹⁶ to an irregular congenital condition found in some girls whereby a membrane blocks the vagina and causes problems in coitus, conception and childbearing, but that in both texts this condition is clearly considered an abnormality, and must be remedied by a physician by the removal of the membrane¹¹⁷. Such descriptions have resonance with modern physiological literature and its account of the imperforate hymen, an unusual condition which requires medical attention. But it is not until the early Christian writings of theologians such as Ambrose that the imperforate hymen becomes not a rare medical condition but the sign of perfect female virginity, represented especially in the uncorrupted body of the Virgin Mary¹¹⁸. This theological image would only gradually be incorporated within medical discourse.

"The hymen has no known function", state the editors of the 35th edition of *Gray's Anatomy*¹¹⁹. Looked at from a historical, rather than a medical, perspective, one might feel that such a statement is somewhat hasty. The function of the hymen in late medieval culture was so important that its physical appearance had to be adjusted to fit that function. It had to be made more solid, more secure, than it was in reality, in order to accommodate the appealing fiction that the virginal woman's body was perfect in its intactness and sealedness, and that such intactness was shattered through loss of virginity. It might be objected that the medical literature quoted has not been placed within a context of late medieval English transmission and readership, and certainly it would be interesting to attempt a more closely contextualised study. But such an objection does not negate this exercise, whose purpose has been to point out in general terms that the hymen should not be taken as a natural given, and therefore beyond historical analysis. Cultures which make a great play of the importance of the "intact" hymen are not engaged in a process of describing a female virginal state, but rather of fabricating that state.

If the intact hymen, in the sense of a barrier, is not a natural physical feature, then what material or social purpose does its creation serve? Having recognised that the relationship between virginity and society is problematic, it becomes possible to begin to

¹¹⁶See Hippocrates, "*Diseases of Women I*", trans. Ann Ellis Hanson in *Signs* 1 (1975), 567-84.

¹¹⁷Sissa, "Maidenhood without Maidenhead", pp. 356-7.

¹¹⁸Sissa, "Maidenhood without Maidenhead", p. 361.

¹¹⁹Warwick and Williams (eds.), *Gray's Anatomy*, p. 1364.

analyse that relationship. The second question that needs to be addressed in this study, then, is the fundamental question of the origins of the relationship under discussion. Such a large question requires a large answer, and I can do little more than appeal to scholars who have not been afraid to seek such broad answers. Control of women's sexuality may be seen as an aspect of male control over the female sex, and of channelling their reproductive function within arenas which serve the interests of the patrilineage. Frederick Engels stated this view most influentially, in his argument that the creation of private property and the transition from a matrilineal to a patrilineal system of inheritance in the ancient world led to male concern about lineage, and an anxiety about proof of paternity. A mother can always be sure that the children she produces are her own, but a father can have no such security. Monogamous marriage was therefore invented, argues Engels, in order to secure the role of the father in reproduction and thus to allow a system of patrilineage¹²⁰. The control of women's sexual activity through the invention of monogamy (which, Engels notes, was required only of women¹²¹) brought about the "world historical defeat of the female sex"¹²², that is, it is at the root of women's oppression and patriarchal control. Gerda Lerner, also wishing to explain the origins of patriarchy, argues for a very similar process but sees the control of female sexuality as preceding, rather than being a consequence of, the creation of private property¹²³.

Whether the former preceded the latter, or vice versa, we may take the association between the control of female sexual and reproductive activity, and patriarchal control of women and concern to maintain the patrilineage to be a useful way into thinking about the necessity for virginity in medieval maidens. The theories of Engels and Lerner do not entirely account for the necessity for premarital chastity, only for wifely fidelity after marriage. But, more broadly speaking, one could argue that the requirement of premarital chastity served the patrilineage through allowing a girl's father or guardian a degree of control over her reproductive life, channelling it into a marriage of which he approved and from which he and the family lineage might benefit. Concerns over daughters' sexual conduct, therefore, originate within the notion of a relationship between family, ownership

¹²⁰Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884; London, 1972), pp. 106, 119-22.

¹²¹Engels, *Family, Private Property and the State*, p. 126.

¹²²Engels, *Family, Private Property and the State*, p. 120.

¹²³Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York, 1986), pp. 49-52.

of property, and the transfer of property via a vertical kin group, that is, by inheritance. In late medieval English society illegitimate children did not impose an insuperable problem, as there were methods by which they could be incorporated within the inheritance system, and to be a bastard did not necessarily carry tremendous social stigma¹²⁴. Yet in recognising that there were strategies by which the problem of illegitimacy could be dealt with, we should not lose sight of the notion that it *was* a problem. The stigma of bastardy, ultimately, rested not so much on the child produced, but at the feet of the ungoverned daughter.

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner argues, in this vein, that a daughter's premarital sexual activity is a problem primarily in societies where there is a strong sense of family identity based in the notion of lineage, in the continuity of family identity from one generation to another¹²⁵. That is, a daughter's chastity is an aspect of the identity of the family group as a whole, because "family" extends vertically into the next generation and beyond, rather than simply extending horizontally to spouses, siblings, cousins, and offspring before they reach reproductive age. In this system the status of the family down the generations determines the status of its individual members, and, conversely, the activities of individual members can positively or adversely affect the family identity within wider cultural models of respectability. In late medieval English society these wider models of respectability included an emphasis on patriarchal control, that is, the idea that a father or husband should govern the lives of the other members of the household. This includes control over female sexual activity more than over male activity, both because within patriarchal society women must be more thoroughly subjugated to men, and because control over female sexuality enables control over their reproduction and hence over the path which the lineage - and its status - shall follow.

¹²⁴Alice Curteis and Chris Given-Wilson outline the common and canon legal perspectives on bastardy in medieval England in their *The Royal Bastards of Medieval England* (London, 1984), pp. 42-48. They show that legal barriers to inheritance, office, and entry to the church did exist for bastards, but that there were many routes around such barriers. On social attitudes, they make the nice point that church moralists could not perhaps afford to be too censorious of bastardy as many of the church's members were themselves bastards, and conclude overall that there was not real social stigma attached to bastardy in this period, pp. 48-54. See also Peter Laslett, "Introduction: Comparing Illegitimacy over Time and Between Cultures" in Peter Laslett, Karla Oosterveen and Richard Smith, *Bastardy and its Comparative History: Studies in the History of Illegitimacy and Marital Nonconformism in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, North America, Jamaica and Japan* (London, 1980), p. 49. Alan Macfarlane in his essay in the same volume suggests that in seventeenth-century England bastardy was only considered a problem if the bastard became a welfare burden on the parish - "Illegitimacy and Illegitimates in English History", pp. 73-5. On bastards in the medieval peasantry see Hanawalt, *Ties that Bound*, pp. 72-3.

¹²⁵Ortner, "The Virgin and the State", p. 19; "Gender and Sexuality", pp. 359-75.

A reading of Ortner's theory suggests a possible methodological approach to the study of the relationship between virginity and material conditions in late medieval English society. Her hypothesis could be tested by examination of different levels of English society, the extent to which each particular group had a sense of the continuity of family identity down the generations, and how well apparent concerns about the chastity of daughters fit this sense of lineage. The extent to which a particular social group felt a sense of family continuity could be measured by such considerations as the existence of family lands and inheritance systems operating within the kin group, the permanence of housing, where a house built to last several generations might be presumed to stay within the family, and the stability of surnames. By testing how well concerns over young women's chastity match up with degrees of concern over the identity of the vertical kin group, one could gain a more detailed impression of the extent to which ideologies of class and gender did or did not intersect on the question of women's sexuality, and along the way gain a more nuanced impression of family and household identity in different social groups. To attempt such an exercise would be a much larger job than can be attempted here, as it would require a detailed interdisciplinary approach to the numerous factors of consideration. I shall do no more than offer a glimpse of possibilities.

Isabella Alan seems to have belonged to the substantial peasantry, or the yeoman class. To what extent might it be possible to determine the concerns about daughters' chastity operating in this group, and compare them with levels of concern within lower status peasant groups? Evidence of amercements for leyrwite is the most obviously useful guide to loss of virginity among village girls, though there are difficulties surrounding interpretation of that evidence. As noted in Chapter Three, Poos and Smith have indicated that poorer girls from Halesowen were more likely to be amerced for leyrwite than better-off girls, and this may have been because presentment juries, made up of wealthy villagers, were more likely to punish poor daughters than their own. Such a conclusion might also apply to their observation that on the manor of Redgrave childwite payers were disproportionately drawn from the lower strata¹²⁶. Goldberg has preferred to read the evidence more literally, and suggest that there were more amercements for leyrwite among groups in which there was less control over daughters' sexual behaviour¹²⁷. This interpretation fits with his findings that ecclesiastical suits to enforce marriage on couples

¹²⁶Poos and Smith, "Legal Windows", p. 150.

¹²⁷Goldberg, *Women Work and Life Cycle*, pp. 208-9.

who were persisting in sexual relations, despite swearing that they would not *sub pena nubendi*, were brought largely against couples from the lower peasantry¹²⁸. Perhaps the leyrwite evidence, whether or not one reads it literally, indicates that the *paterfamiliae* of well-off peasant families were more concerned that their daughters' reputations *seem* clear, whether they were in fact chaste or not. There emerges a tentative, yet plausible, picture of a higher degree of concern over daughters' chastity in wealthier peasant families.

How might this concern tally with wider notions of vertical bonds of kinship, as they applied within different levels within the peasantry? Such questions are not easy to answer. One way in might be to consider the existence of "family" lands and inheritability. Yet no easy solutions are at present available. Historians such as Zvi Razi have emphasised the importance of transmission of land between family members within peasant society from the later thirteenth into the fifteenth centuries, while other historians, including Christopher Dyer, have argued that bonds between family and land actually weakened in the later fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, with the greater availability of land in the post-Plague era. Historians of peasant society in general have waged a long-running debate over the existence of "family" property and inheritability, and it is certainly more than a non-expert in the field can do to try to draw a clear pattern from the various accounts¹²⁹. It seems significant, however, in considering the question of the difference between different social groups in their attitudes to the relationship between family and property, that Razi notes that in Halesowen from 1270 to 1400, a substantial tenant engaged in intrafamilial economic activity (including inheritance) on average almost twice as often as a middling tenant, six times as often as a small-holder, and twelve times as often as a cottager¹³⁰.

Other evidence may be brought into play. Notions of the importance of vertical kinship bonds may potentially be discernable in the relative permanence of the housing built by different groups. Again, here we stumble into a field in which specialists are in the process of formulating theories. Buildings archaeologists dealing with vernacular housing

¹²⁸Goldberg, "Fiction in the Archives", forthcoming.

¹²⁹For a summary of the main lines of argument within the debate see R.M. Smith, "Some Issues Concerning Families and their Property in Rural England 1250-1800" in idem (ed.), *Land, Kinship and Life Cycle* (Cambridge, 1984), and the essays by Razi and Dyer in the same volume. The debate seems to have cooled rather than being resolved. For a recent addition see Zvi Razi, "Intrafamilial Ties and Relationships in the Medieval Village: A Quantitative Approach Employing Manor Court Rolls" in Zvi Razi and Richard Smith (eds.), *Medieval Society and the Manor Court* (Oxford, 1996).

¹³⁰Razi, "Intrafamilial Ties", p. 371. Yet he also claims, with little obvious supporting evidence, that kinship bonds were important to rich and poor peasants alike, p. 374.

have noted a shift in building construction at the end of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries towards more apparently permanent structures, with earthfast timbers beginning to be replaced by timbers set on post pads or stone foundations, thus lengthening the life of the structure¹³¹. There is some suggestion that less permanent structures continued to be used for certain buildings, and these have been tentatively linked to the lower peasantry¹³². A key difficulty, however, in linking building types to social groups is in determining the motivating factors behind the construction of particular buildings. As Dyer makes clear, many of the buildings under consideration were put up at the instigation of the landlord, and his own financial motivations may have been behind the relative permanence or impermanence of different housing types¹³³.

Evidence concerning inheritance of property and housing is inconclusive, yet would warrant further investigation. Surname evidence might also be examined for this purpose. Evidence suggests that where hereditary surnames were fairly firmly established for aristocratic and gentry families by the later thirteenth century, other rural families only acquired stable hereditary surnames by the mid fourteenth century in Oxfordshire, and possibly slightly later in other parts of the country¹³⁴. An analysis which focused more on different surname usage within different parts of the peasantry might be fruitful. Ortner's hypothesis regarding the link between notions of vertical kinship and the requirement for daughters' premarital chastity is thus neither confirmed nor disproved by available studies, but it would bear further examination.

The picture which emerges from a glance at urban society, excluding the urban elite, is even more complicated, and intriguing. In this context it appears that while the connection between vertically-conceived identities and daughters' chastity is relevant, it does not provide the whole story. For while there is evidence from such sources as cause

¹³¹S. Wrathnell, "The Vernacular Threshold of Northern Peasant Houses" in *Vernacular Architecture* 15 (1984), 29-33, p. 29; Dyer, "English Peasant Buildings", pp. 35-6; R.A. Meesom and C.M. Welch, "Earthfast Posts: The Persistence of Alternative Building Techniques" in *Vernacular Architecture* 24 (1993), 1-17, p. 2. I owe these references to Martin Jones.

¹³²Meesom and Welch, "Earthfast Posts", p. 16.

¹³³Dyer, "English Peasant Buildings", pp. 23-4.

¹³⁴Richard A. McKinley, *The Surnames of Oxfordshire*, English Surnames Series 3 (London, 1977), pp. 7-25; cf. idem, *Norfolk and Suffolk Surnames in the Middle Ages*, English Surnames Series 2 (Chichester, 1975), pp. 3-30. See also Judith M. Bennett, "Spouse, Siblings and Surnames: Reconstructing Families from Manor Court Rolls" in *Journal of British Studies* 23 (1983), 26-46, pp. 36-7; Razi, *Life Marriage and Death*, pp. 3-4.

paper material and conduct books aimed at urban girls that the conduct of daughters was of considerable concern¹³⁵, the conduct of other girls living within the household could also be a problem. For in towns, where (at least after the Black Death) many maidens were not living with their families but were in service, or sometimes in apprenticeship, in households whose heads they were not necessarily related to, the emphasis on premarital chastity remained firm. Here it was often linked to the identity and respectability of the households in which the girls lived and worked.

The control of a master or mistress over the sexual activities of the young women under their roofs is stated explicitly in the extant female apprenticeship indentures. The male and female indentures are, in terms of formula, almost identical in their listings of the duties of both apprentice and master or mistress for the term of apprenticeship, but differ on the regulation of the apprentices' sexual conduct. Where William of Lincoln was bound in York in 1364 to commit neither adultery nor fornication within the house of his master, nor in any way with the daughter, wife or maid of his master, and Nicholas of Kyghlay was also enjoined in 1371 to refrain from adultery or fornication with his master's wife and daughter, in London Margaret Seford (1378) and Katherine Nougale (1392) were ordered not to commit fornication either within the house of their masters' *or outside (nec extra)*, and Eleanor Fyncham (1447) was bound not to commit fornication in any way at all (*ulla modo modo* [sic])¹³⁶. The sexual conduct of male apprentices was thus regulated to a certain extent, and it should be noted that in addition to remaining chaste within their masters' house they were also forbidden to visit brothels, yet that regulation remained partial in comparison with the complete control over girls' sexual behaviour.

This double standard cannot be explained solely in terms of the respectability of the family and vertically created identity. Rather, the example of apprenticeship regulations indicates that identity was constructed horizontally as well as vertically, where horizontal refers to relationships of household, immediate kin, and perhaps of class, and thus that the behaviour of the women resident within the household at a particular moment was bound up with the identity and respectability of the household.

One might argue that the masters and mistresses of apprentices were doing no more than acting for the interests of a girl's parents when they prohibited her sexual activity. Yet

¹³⁵See above, Chapter Four.

¹³⁶York Merchant Adventurers' Hall Mss; Sellers (ed.), *York Memorandum Book* 1, pp. 54-55; W.A.M. 5966; C.L.R.O., Misc. Mss 186.3; N.R.O., Hare Mss 2091.

the evidence that many apprenticed girls were orphans, in the sense that they had lost their fathers, cautions against such an explanation¹³⁷. Moreover, there is nothing within the indentures to suggest that the interests of parents were of particular importance in the framing of the contract. The indentures are essentially divided into four main parts: the statement of formal apprenticeship, the identity of the parties and term of apprenticeship; the duties of the apprentice; the duties of the master and/or mistress; and identities of the apprentice's pledge, witnesses to the document, and date. The clauses pertaining to fornication, in both the indentures of boys and girls, are contained within the second section, regarding their duties to the master or mistress. The other duties listed in this section include serving with obedience and faithfulness, and keeping the master's/mistress' secrets, promising not to cause financial loss by damage to the employer, nor to waste his or her goods, not to withdraw from service before the end of the contract, nor to keep any secret from the master/mistress. The clause regarding prohibition of sexual activity belongs with those dealing with playing unseemly games, going to a tavern except to do an employers' business, or marrying without permission, which might seem to belong to an abstract moral code, or to the role of master and mistress *in loco parentis*, but are more accurately read as part of the employers' professional interests. Their relationship with the apprentice is first and foremost a business relationship, and their moral concerns are embedded within a business code. The artisanal household which is reputable in its business dealings is one in which, among other considerations, the women resident in the household conform to a code of sexual behaviour which may be derived from patriarchal concerns about control of property and inheritance, but which has gone beyond a purely functional motivation and taken on symbolic, or moral, qualities.

The necessity to seek horizontal, as well as vertical, aspects to familial or household identity is, perhaps, of particular importance in towns. Where elite social groups and the wealthy peasantry, at least, seem to have based their identity within notions of lineage which extended both into the past and the future, it may be that members of the artisanal group in towns had a notion of identity more firmly based in the present, and thus constructed horizontally as well as vertically. On the issue of property and family holdings, Heather Swanson, in her study of medieval artisans, states that "few artisans anywhere

¹³⁷See above, Chapter Three.

owned even one property, let alone any more¹³⁸. Large numbers of properties in medieval towns were owned by ecclesiastical or secular institutions rather than individuals. Thus, Sarah Rees Jones estimates that the six largest institutions in York owned over a thousand properties¹³⁹. Moreover, Swanson finds that of 211 York artisans who bequeathed property or leases by terms of years in their wills, 52 left all or part of this property to the church¹⁴⁰. Thus ecclesiastical holdings in towns grew very large. The existence of interest in the vertical kin group may be more apparent in the transmission of moveable property, but still the evidence concerning transmission of holdings is suggestive, and further investigation might prove fruitful.

Can we find a sense of lineage in continuity of occupation from father to son? Swanson has drawn a sample of 806 artisans' sons from 1387 to 1534 who took out freedom by patrimony, and finds that 415 of these kept their father's craft, while 184 moved to another form of manufacturing or victualling¹⁴¹. The impetus to follow in a father's footsteps was not motivated solely by a sense of family tradition, however, as Swanson shows that certain crafts which required expensive tools (such as the metalworking crafts) or brought good financial security (such as butchering, milling or vintnering) predominated among those where the son took on the father's craft, while financially insecure, itinerant or disliked crafts (such as carpentry and smithing, stoneworking, cordwaining and tanning) were unpopular among sons¹⁴². Perhaps it was not, after all, a sense of family continuity which prompted artisanal concern over morality. Artisanal families were perhaps, as Kowaleski suggests, characterised by "fluidity and instability", and "even elite families rarely lasted beyond beyond three generations (in the male line) and extended family structures are almost never found in English towns"¹⁴³. It seems notable in this context that, in some areas, hereditary surnames were more slowly established in towns than in rural

¹³⁸Heather Swanson, *Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989), p. 160. Her study focuses mainly on evidence from York.

¹³⁹Sarah Rees Jones, "Property, Tenure and Rents: Some Aspects of the Topography and Economy of Medieval York", unpublished DPhil thesis, University of York, 1987, pp. 199-200.

¹⁴⁰Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, p. 159.

¹⁴¹Swanson *Medieval Artisans*, p. 165. She draws her figures from the *York Register of Freeman*.

¹⁴²Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, pp. 165-8.

¹⁴³Maryanne Kowaleski, "The History of Urban Families" in *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988), 47-63, p. 58.

areas¹⁴⁴.

It seems useful to conceive of the context in which premarital chastity was a necessity for girls in towns as neither solely a vertical hierarchy, nor a horizontal set of relations, but as a criss-crossing matrix of social and economic relations. Considerations of family and lineage dominate the vertical, while considerations of household and perhaps class dominate the horizontal. Hence the anger of John Bown, a cordwainer, who, upon finding his servants Margaret Barker and John Waryngton in bed together, effectively forced John to marry Margaret and thus do "honour" to her¹⁴⁵. In higher status groups, such as the gentry, concerns over the behaviour of non-familial household members seems less firmly tied to a sense of household honour. The responses of gentry household heads to the ruin of a female servant may be glimpsed in a letter contained in the Plumpton collection:

Right worshipfull master Plompton, as hartely as I can I recomend me unto you, desyryng you to be good master unto this poore woman, the bearer hereof. Sir, it is so that a servant of yours hath gotten a child with hir, the which is lost for lacke of keeping, as God knowes. She hath kept it as long as she may, whils she hath not a cloth to her backe but which I have given hir, since she came to my service. And if it wold please you to heare this poore woman speake, I truste to God ye willbe good master to hir and rather the better for my sake. And if I had not bene, she wold have run hir way; and all this wile I keep the child of my own proper cost, and will doe till I here some word from you¹⁴⁶.

The role of the head of the household as financial guardian over the interests of his *familia* is evident here, but there is little sense of moral outrage. The ruined servant becomes an economic burden on the gentry house in which she serves, but she does not obviously affect the honour of the house. The difference may lie in the gap between the social status of employer and employed, compared with the artisanal situation. In this social group, unlike artisanal society, the honour of the household rests mostly with the behaviour of the vertical kin group, which includes daughters, more than in horizontal relationships, as is suggested by the gentry letters and conduct literature discussed in Chapter Four.

The Ortnr hypothesis needs to be modified in connection with an urban context, but it still provides a useful approach. Additional factors concerning the structure of the

¹⁴⁴McKinley, *Sumames of Oxfordshire*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁴⁵Translated in Goldberg (ed. and trans.), *Women in England*, pp. 110-114. For a discussion of this case see Goldberg in Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in the MA*, forthcoming.

¹⁴⁶PC, p. 109, letter from William Wittcars to Sir Robert or William Plumpton (not dated by the editor except to the reign of Henry VII)

household, and of family and household identity, provide additional factors. The importance of girls' chaste conduct is ultimately, I contend, based in material or economic considerations, but at a secondary level it could take on a symbolic, as well as a functional, aspect. It was a more symbolic association of female chastity with patriarchal control which necessitated the maintenance of female servants' and apprentices' chastity in urban households. Another symbolic feature of female chastity before marriage was that it may have provided reassurance of the young woman's chastity following marriage. That it was necessary for a married woman to maintain a monogamous sexual relationship with her husband has been adequately explained by the theories of Engels and Lerner. If a young woman was known to be sexually respectable while unmarried, she was probably regarded to be more trustworthy as a wife. In the early twentieth century Sigmund Freud, certainly a product of his own culture, argued that an adolescent girl had a low sex drive (unlike adolescent boys), and that whichever man awakened that sex drive by first intercourse with her would ensure her future sexual, emotional and practical dependence on him¹⁴⁷. This explained, thought Freud, the requirement of pre-marital virginity in girls of his culture. The belief that first intercourse at too early an age causes excessive libidinousness in women in later years dates at least to Aristotle's *Politics*, and was thus transmitted in the later middle ages via Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum*¹⁴⁸. In the fifteenth-century Middle English gynaecological and obstetrical text entitled "Þe Knowyng of Womans Kynde in Chyldyng", it is stated that a maiden should not become sexually active until she is at least fifteen, lest she become barren, her breath become sour, or "sche xall be to lythy [pleasing, wanting to please] or lauy [?unruly] of her body to oþer þan her hosbonde"¹⁴⁹. Though this text does not explicitly forbid premarital sex for girls, it could perhaps be interpreted as suggesting that loss of virginity could lead to a hazardous, uncontrollable sexual appetite. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, it will be recalled, said that "among alle þat is iloued in a wenche chastite and clenness is iloued most", and that "a maide haþ þat name *virgo* of clenness and incorruptioun as it were *virago*, for sche knowiþ not þe verrey passion

¹⁴⁷Sigmund Freud, "The Taboo of Virginity" in James Strachey and Angela Richards (eds.), *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, Pelican Freud Library vol. 7 (1917; Harmondsworth, 1977), pp. 265-6.

¹⁴⁸Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 621. On Giles of Rome see Biller, "Demographic Thought", p. 67.

¹⁴⁹Lisa Howarth (ed.), "Þe Knowyng of Womans Kynde in Chyldyng" in "Practice of Midewifery", pp. 35-6.

of women"¹⁵⁰.

The association of girls' early sexual experiences with later libidinousness does not, however, provide an account of the requirement of premarital virginity. After all, why should early intercourse be linked with later lasciviousness? That connection does not supply a cause, but rather a result, of the power of the ideology. Also, although this analysis has focused on the ways in which men found virginity socially desirable in their daughters, apprentices and servants, and the ways in which that virginity was of benefit to them, it should not be thought that the ideology of premarital virginity was one which only males found desirable, and which only they perpetuated. Though in broad terms the control of unmarried girls' sexuality was enacted from above, it is likely that many girls were complicit in this, and thus sustained the ideology from within. It may be that maidens often maintained their virginity and sought husbands, so that they could provide fathers for their children, and live safely within an approved economic framework. Some ecclesiastical court cases indicate that the female party was concerned to pursue the men with whom they had had sexual relations, and to secure marriages to them¹⁵¹. Even eleven year old Alice de Rouclif allegedly said to her sister-in-law that she was anxious that her marriage to John Marrays be solemnised, and that she was "old enough and mature enough to be his wife, but not his mistress"¹⁵². With an ideology as powerful as that of the requirement of women's premarital chastity, it is unsurprising to find that women helped in its perpetuation.

The social value of women's virginity was one of the elements which contributed to the dominant notion of the maiden as an ideal of femininity. That, combined with the theological tradition which both claimed virginity as the highest state of human existence, and linked virginity to the youthful and desirable maiden, formed the idea that maidenhood represented the perfect age of woman's life. Yet the social and economic argument can only explain why virginity was valued and desirable. It cannot explain why it was perfect. Within a patriarchal system which places an emphasis on the control of female sexuality, manifestations such as virginity, motherhood, or the eternally sexually-available woman of

¹⁵⁰Bart. Ang., *De Prop. Rerum*, lib. 6, cap. 6, pp. 301-2.

¹⁵¹The case of Margaret Barker against John Waryngton, B.I.H.R. CP. F 127, is a clear example of this tendency. See also B.I.H.R. CP. E 92, Alice Roding c. John Boton.

¹⁵²B.I.H R. CP. E 89, translation from Goldberg (ed. and trans.), *Women in England*, pp. 60-1.

current men's magazines may all be equally emblematic of such control. The appeal of the maiden - fertile yet virginal - over the other types of femininity available in the English late middle ages must ultimately find its roots in the cult of virginity. That ideology, peculiarly medieval, would break up in the sixteenth century, and with it the break up of the idea of the maiden as the peak of femininity. That is another story.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1: The Birth of Henry VI, from Viscount Dillon and W.H. St John-Hope (eds.), *The Pageant of the Birth, Life and Death of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, K.G. 1389-1439* (London, 1914), pl. 44 (22b). Late 15th C.



Fig. 2: Initial introducing Psalm 80 (the marriage of David and Michal), from *The Psalter and Hours of John, Duke of Bedford*; London, British Library, Ms Additional 42131. B. fol.151v. Source: Richard Marks and Nigel Morgan (eds.), *The Golden Age of English Manuscript Painting 1200-1500* (New York, 1981), pl. 34. c. 1414-23.



Fig. 3: Tomb brass of Elizabeth Broughton, Spinster; Chennies, Buckinghamshire. Source: Henry H. Trivick, *The Craft and Design of Monumental Brasses* (London, 1969), pl. 121. c. 1524.



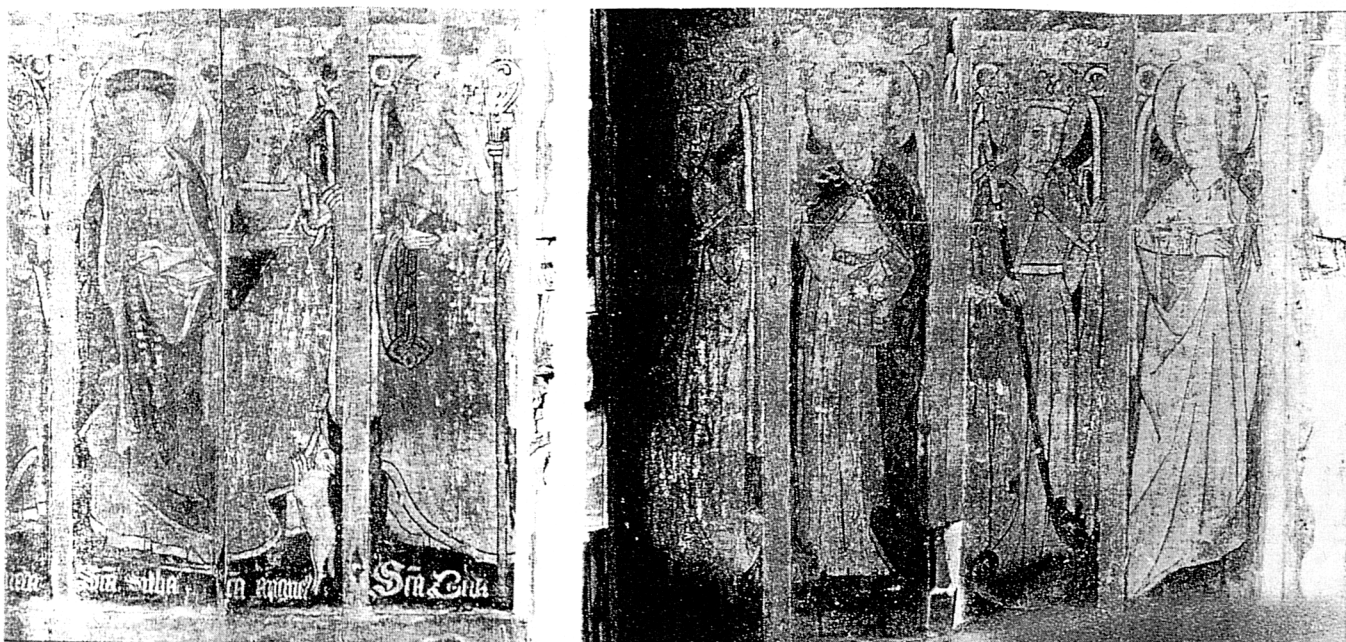
Fig. 4: The coronation of a king and queen, from *Liber Regalis*; London, Westminster Abbey, Ms. 38, f. 20. Source: Marks and Morgan, *Golden Age*, pl. 24. c. 1382.



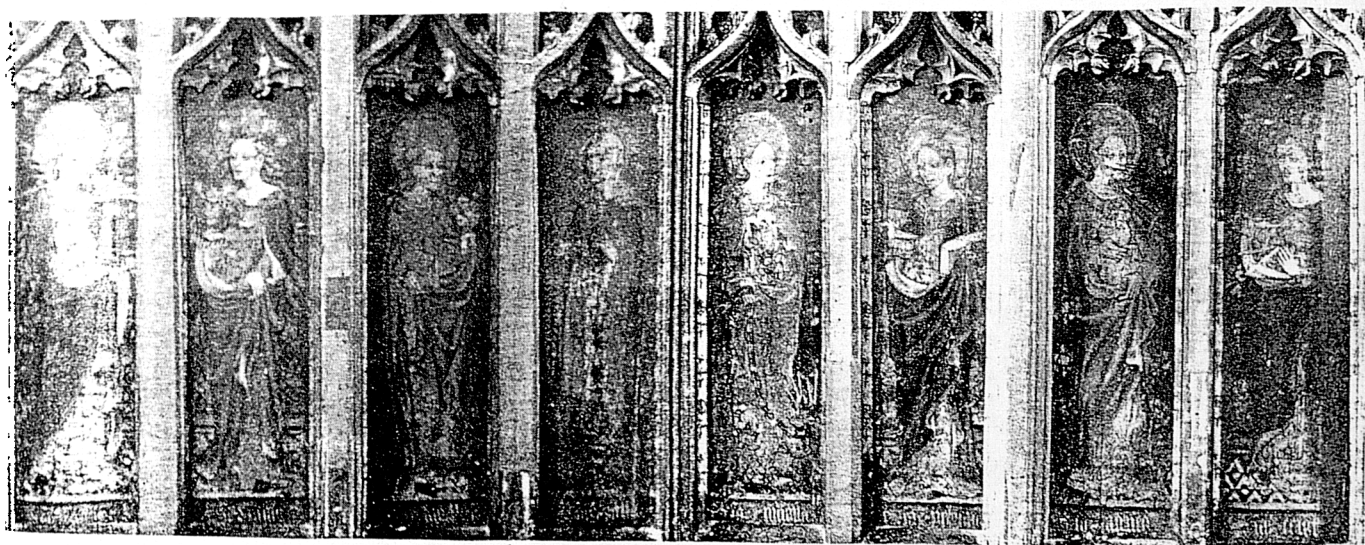
Fig. 5: King Alkmund and Queen Siwarre, from John Lydgate, *Lives of Saints Edmund and Freimund*; London, British Library, Ms Harley 2278, f. 10. Source: Kathleen L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts 1390-1490*, 2 vols., vol. 6 of J.J.G. Alexander, *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles* (London, 1996), vol. 1, pl. 312. c. 1434-44.



Fig. 6: The head of a queen, from *Bedford Hours and Psalter*, f. 8. Source: Scott, *Later Gothic Mss* 1, pl. 216. c. 1414-23.



The South Screen at Westhall: from left to right Etheldreda, Sitha, Agnes, Bridget, Katherine, Dorothy, Margaret, Apollonia.



The South Screen at North Elmham: from left to right, Barbara, Cecilia, Dorothy, Sitha, Julian, Petronilla, Agnes, Christina.

Figs. 7 and 8: Rood screens depicting virgin martyrs. Source: Eamon Duffy, "Holy Maydens, Holy Wyfes: The Cult of Women Saints in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century England" in W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds.), *Women in the Church*, Studies in Church History 27 (Oxford, 1990), pls. 1 and 2. Later 15th - early 16th C.



Figs. 9 and 10: St Dorothy and ?St Ursula, from *The Heller Hours*; Berkeley, California, University of California, Bancroft Library Ms UCB 150, ff. 245v. and 258v. Source: Scott, *Later Gothic Mss* 1, pls. 460-1. c. 1470-80.



Fig. 11: St Anne teaching the Virgin, from *The Hours of the Virgin*; Oxford, Bodleian Library, Latin Liturgical Mss f. 2, f. 104v. Source: Scott, *Later Gothic Mss* 1, p. 95. c. 1400.

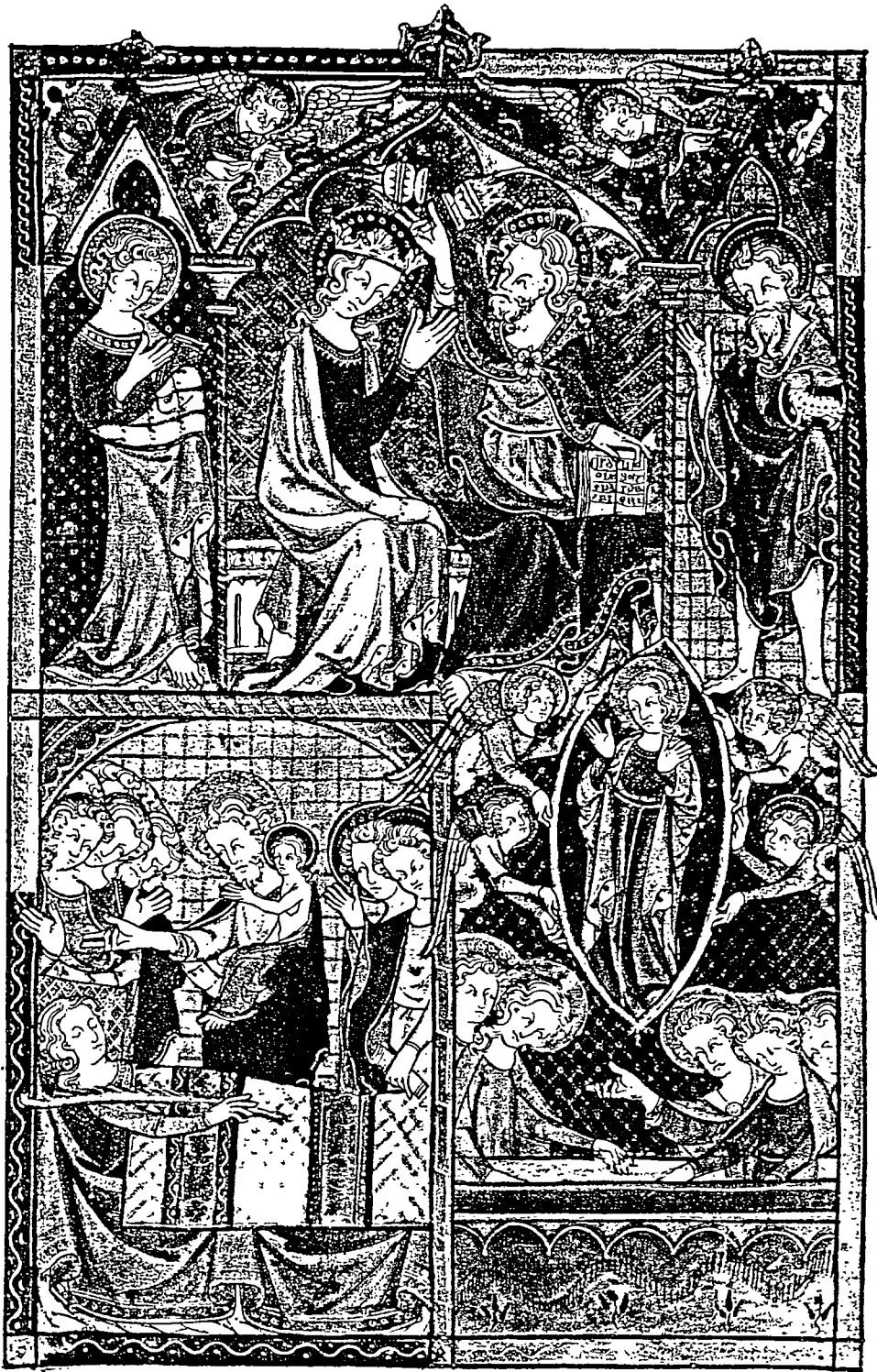


Fig. 12: The death, assumption and coronation of the Virgin, from *The Ramsey Psalter*, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms M 302, fol. 4. Source: Marks and Morgan, *Golden Age*, pl. 17. late 13th C.



Fig. 13: The assumption of the Virgin, roof boss from York Minster. Pre-Reformation.

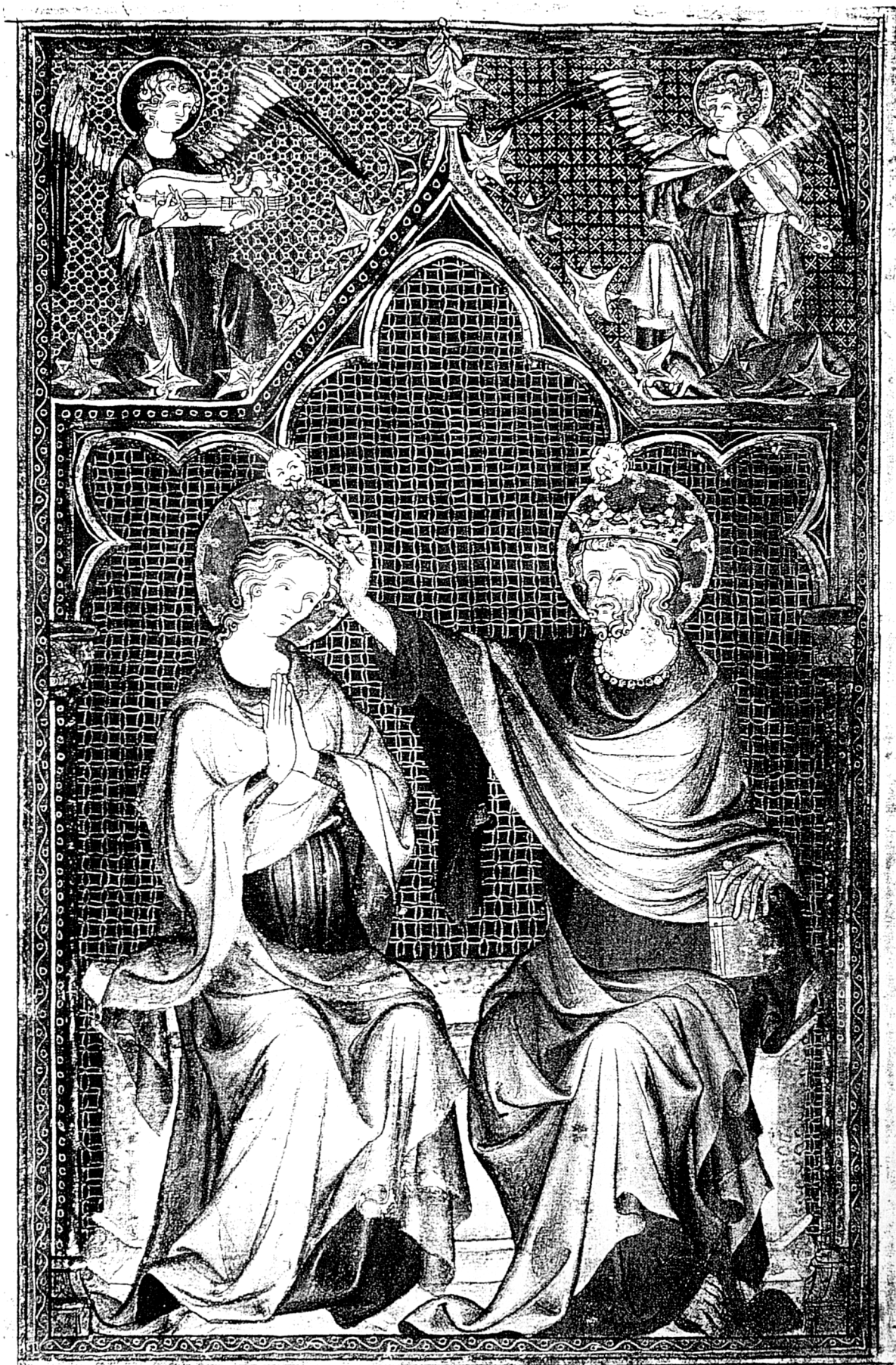


Fig. 14: The coronation of the Virgin, from *The De Lisle Psalter*; London, British Library, Ms Arundel 83 pt. 2, fol. 134v. Source: Marks and Morgan, *Golden Age*, pl. 22. Early 14th C.

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