

The Reasons of Misrule

[I]

"It is sometimes expedient to allow the people to play the fool and make merry," said the French lawyer Claude de Rubys at the end of the sixteenth century, "lest by holding them in with too great a rigor, we put them in despair. . . . These gay sports abolished, the people go instead to taverns, drink up and begin to cackle, their feet dancing under the table, to decipher King, princes, . . . the State and Justice and draft scandalous defamatory leaflets."¹ De Rubys' view is a traditional one, but it tells us more about the thought of urban magistrates than about the real uses of popular recreation. I hope to show that rather than being a mere "safety valve," deflecting attention from social reality, festive life can on the one hand perpetuate certain values of the community (even guarantee its survival), and on the other hand criticize political order. Misrule can have its own rigor and can also decipher king and state.

The festivities that de Rubys favored for his native Lyon were found in all the cities of France, and indeed of Europe, in the later Middle Ages and the sixteenth century: masking, costuming, hiding; charivaris (a noisy, masked demonstration to humiliate some wrongdoer in the community), farces, parades, and floats; collecting and distributing money and sweets; dancing, music-making,

the lighting of fires; reciting of poetry, gaming, and athletic contests—the list in all its forms and variations would be longer than the 81 games in Bruegel's famous painting or the 217 games that Rabelais gave to Gargantua. They took place at regular intervals, and whenever the occasion warranted it; they were timed to the calendar of religion and season (the twelve days of Christmas, the days before Lent, early May, Pentecost, the feast of Saint Jean Baptiste in June, the Feast of the Assumption in mid-August, and All Saints) and timed also to domestic events, marriages, and other family affairs.

One of these urban festivals was sponsored by clerics—namely the Feast of Fools at Christmastime, when a choirboy or chaplain would be elected bishop and preside while the minor clergy burlesqued the mass and even confession, and led an ass around the church. By the late fifteenth century this topsy-turvy saturnalia was being slowly banished from the cathedrals,² and apart from it virtually all the popular recreations were initiated by laymen. They were not, however, “official” affairs in the sixteenth-century French city; that is, city governments ordinarily did not plan, program, and finance them as they did the great Entry parades for royalty or other important personages or the parades in celebration of peace treaties. Rather, the festivities were put on by informal circles of friends and family,³ sometimes by craft or professional guilds and confraternities, and very often by organizations that literary historians have called “*sociétés joyeuses*” (or “fool-societies” or “play-acting societies”)⁴ but that I will call Abbeys, since that name comes closest to what they usually called themselves—the Abbeys of Misrule.

To their officers the Abbeys gave diverse titles, but certain common themes are played upon: power, jurisdiction, youth, misrule, pleasure, folly, even madness. Thus around 1500 there were Abbots of Misrule (Abbés de Maugouvert) in Lyon, Mâcon, Poitiers, Rodez, Briançon, and Abbeville; an Abbot of Gaiety (Liesse) and his Good Children at Arras; a Prince of Pleasure at Valenciennes; a Prince of Youth at Soissons; a Prince of Fools (Prince

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des Sots) at Amiens; an Abbot of Conards or Cornards* at Rouen; and a Mère d'Enfance and her Children at Bordeaux and a Mère Folle and her Infanterie at Dijon (both of them men dressed up as women).⁵ In some cities there were a host of other dignitaries: for instance, Rouen's Abbot of Conards had serving him in 1541 the Prince of Improvidence, the Cardinal of Bad Measure, Bishop Flat-Purse, Duke Kickass, and the Grand Patriarch of Syphilitics, to mention only a few.⁶

These Abbeys acted like courts and used their jurisdictions. Mock coins were issued and distributed to spectators during parades (see Plate 5).⁷ Lyon had both a Judge of Misrule and a Bench of Bad Advice.⁸ In Dijon and Rouen, cases were heard—foolish cases and also those concerning the honor of the Abbeys or the behavior of their dignitaries.⁹ Proclamatory letters were issued such as those of 1536 from the Abbot of Conards and his court permitting all men for 101 years to take two wives. What

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* Both Conard and Cornard were used as names for the members of the Misrule Abbey at Rouen, though Conard was more frequent. To sixteenth-century observers, the words suggested the various uses of folly, sexuality, power, and noise. A *conard* was defined as a *sot*, or fool. The word also had associations with *con*, as in sixteenth-century pictures purporting that the female genitalia made fools out of men and were the source of male energy. A *cornard* was a cuckolded husband, the husband wearing the phallic horns on his head. The two words were related, according to a seventeenth-century commentator, because of their similar sound, because both fools and deceived husbands wore horns, and because a husband was a fool to let himself be cuckolded. The wearing of horns could also evoke the diabolic, the pagan, and the Jewish, as well as the ancient meanings of honor and victory and the medieval horned mitre of the bishop, sometimes worn by an abbot as well. Finally, a woodcut of the Abbot of Conards from the 1530's shows him blowing a horn, which has a flag with a horn on it and the words “O Conardz” upside down. The mocking noise made by a Misrule Abbey may be what is intended here. See E. Picot and P. Lacombe, eds., *Querelle de Marot et Sagon* (Rouen, 1920), pièce 1; Pierre Borel, *Trésor de Recherches et Antiquitez Gauloises et Françaises* (Paris, 1655), pp. 101, 110; *Grand Larousse de la langue française* (Paris, 1972), II, 1847; Eduard Fuchs, *Die Frau in der Karikatur* (Munich, 1907), p. 183; J. A. Pitt-Rivers, *The People of the Sierra* (London, 1954), p. 116; William Willeford, *The Fool and His Scepter* (Evanston, Ill., 1969), p. 184; Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Berkeley, Calif., 1970), chaps. 8, 10.

reason was given? The Turks have put out to sea to destroy Christendom and we must appease them by becoming polygamous.¹⁰

With the Turkish fleet, which in fact had been threatening the Mediterranean under the Admiral Khairad-Din Barbarossa, a note of reality was sounded in the midst of the May revels of the Abbey of Conards. This was no exceptional occurrence. Real life was always deeply embedded in these carnivals, and not only because Misrule always implies the Rule that it parodies. Real people were mocked by the Abbeys in clamorous charivaris and parades for their real everyday behavior: husbands beaten by their wives were led by a noisy, masked, and costumed throng through the town facing backwards on an ass (see Plate 7), or if not the husband himself then a neighbor who shouted "it is not for my deed, it is for my neighbor's."¹¹ Often the form in which this monstrous reversal of nature had occurred was acted out: thus a 1566 festival in Lyon included seven floats in which husbands identified by street and occupation were being beaten variously with tripe, wooden sticks, knives, forks, spoons, frying pans, trenchers, and water pots; were having stones thrown at them; were having their beards pulled; and were being kicked in the genitalia—each, as the printed description said, representing the actual "martyr" of the quarter.¹²

Nor were these the only victims of charivaris: widows or widowers remarrying were vulnerable, as were husbands deceived by their wives and husbands who beat their wives during the month of May (a special month for women).¹³

There were many other occasions for mockery by the Abbeys of Misrule, but readers are surely wondering (as I did when I had this preliminary data in front of me, most of it from sixteenth-century printed scenarios and other *urban* sources) what kind of organizations these really were, what they were really up to, where they came from and where they were going, and what linked together their seemingly disparate recreations. Most books on "everyday life" in the late Middle Ages and early modern period

do not help us very much, for they merely describe the curious charivaris and carnivals and stop short of analysis. Thus to search for the meaning of Misrule, I went first to men who had lived during the Renaissance, then to modern historians of literature who had treated festive organizations and customs as sources for the Renaissance theatre, and then to the theoreticians of play and recreation.

Both in the Renaissance and in our own day, two modes of explanation have been used to account for the form and content of popular festivities and games—one historical, the other functional. A 1556 treatise by Guillaume Paradin, dean of Beaujeu, traced mumming back to Greek and Roman festivals in which it was permissible to mask oneself, imitate magistrates, and publicly proclaim the vices and faults of others. Indeed, said the good cleric, all dances, games, and kingdoms on saints' days were but "*ethnisme et paganisme*."¹⁴ Some fifty years later Claude Noiret, a judge of Langres, gave a similar account in his *Origin of Masks, Mumming and . . . Charivari*, but added information on the use of public humiliation and the parade backward on an ass as legal penalties in the classical world, as well as on Roman law regarding second marriages (which, as we have seen, were occasions for charivari).¹⁵

Modern scholarship, working not only with ancient sources but with studies of primitive and peasant religion, has enriched this picture of historical transmission. As E. K. Chambers said in his great study of the medieval stage, "the traditional beliefs and customs of the medieval or modern peasant are in nine cases out of ten but the *detritus* of heathen mythology and heathen worship. . . . Village festivals . . . are but fragments of the naïve cults addressed by a primitive folk to the beneficent deities of field and wood and river." The Feast of Fools then not merely went back to the Roman Kalends of January, but also had primitive features that had passed through peasant communities to the city cathedrals: the holiday bishop of the Christmas revels, like all other holiday lords, was a survival of that temporary king, described

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in Fraser's *Golden Bough*, once elected by his fellows for human sacrifice.¹⁶

Q | How then do we account for the specific features of Abbeys and Kingdoms of Misrule and their charivaris and carnivals? According to Chambers and the literary school, they were simply a secularization during the fifteenth century of the declining Feast of Fools.¹⁷ According to others, they represented commoners imitating their betters, that is, imitating the judicial role of the seigneur¹⁸ or certain allegedly aristocratic customs of late chivalry.¹⁹ These theories are wrong. The imagery of the lay organizations was usually monastic rather than episcopal as in the Feast of Fools. The lay societies had mock jurisdiction over marriages and domestic affairs, for which there is no precedent in the Feast of Fools and no clear precedent in feudal law. And the Misrule Abbeys existed in some form in French cities from the thirteenth century on, contemporaneous with the cathedral fête and prior to the flowering of late medieval chivalry.²⁰

Finally, these last theories do not clarify for us the uses of Misrule, for they rest on a picture of city-dwellers either acting out ancient and magical customs whose meaning had long since been forgotten or copying their social superiors just for the sake of copying. Thus we must turn to a second, functional, approach to find the sense in popular recreations. "Foolishness . . . is our second nature," said a fifteenth-century defender of the Feast of Fools, "and must freely spend itself at least once a year. Wine barrels burst if from time to time we do not open them and let in some air."²¹

For us, *homo ludens* is a more complex person than this (as he was for Shakespeare and Rabelais), and modern theoreticians have tried to sort out his games as they appear and are used in different cultures. In these typologies, the carnival, masks, and misrule are usually seen as functional characteristics of primitive, or at least traditionalist, preindustrial societies. Roger Caillois argues in *Les jeux et les hommes* that such festivities bring coherence to primitive societies; their apparent disorder is actually a source of

order in societies lacking in contractual relationships.²² In a less paradoxical view ably developed by Keith Thomas, the carnival is seen as a prepolitical safety valve for the members of a structured, hierarchical society, and because of its spontaneity and irregular rhythm, the expression and reinforcement of "a pre-industrial sense of time."²³

In contrast, the anthropologist Victor Turner and the Soviet structuralist Mikhail Bakhtin see topsy-turvy play or rite as present in all societies. For Turner, the ritual of status reversal—whether of an Ashanti ceremony, a Christian sect, or a teenage street gang—serves to loosen the rigors of a structured society and to "infuse" through the system at least temporarily the values of an egalitarian community. For Bakhtin, in his beautiful study of Rabelais, the carnival is always a primary source of liberation, destruction, and renewal, but the scope it is allowed changes in different periods. Before the existence of classes and the state, the comic realm was equal to the serious; with slave and feudal societies, including that of the sixteenth century, the carnival becomes a second life, a second reality for the people, separated from power and the state but still public and perennial; in bourgeois society (and alas, one feels, in Bakhtin's socialist society as well) it is reduced to the home and the holiday. The carnival does not, however, reinforce the serious institutions and rhythms of society as in the other functional theories just mentioned; it helps to change them. In Rabelais' day, says Bakhtin, it provided the people with an actual experience of life without hierarchy as against the fixed categories of "official" medieval culture.²⁴

These historical and functional formulations provide us with a framework and some alternatives for interpreting the Abbeys of Misrule. They are, however, very general; we need accurate historical precedents closer to the sixteenth century than the Roman Empire or the sacrificial king, and we need more information about the Abbeys themselves in order to ascertain their uses and to decide where the balance lies in their recreations between tradition and innovation and between the prepolitical and the political.

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To track down the source of Misrule, I left the streets of Rouen and Dijon and Lyon and other cities and went to the villages. I left the works of historians, with their literary or political bias, and went to those of the anthropologists, especially the many systematic studies of France by Arnold Van Gennep. Everything I shall say about the villages, however, I have confirmed in hundreds of royal pardons from the later Middle Ages, from which a French archivist, Roger Vaultier, has extracted and published all material bearing on folk customs.²⁵

Adolescents
We discover from the twelfth century (and undoubtedly before), throughout France, organizations of the unmarried men in peasant communities who have reached the age of puberty. When precisely they joined or whether there were initiation rites has not been discovered. These young men were called *varlets* and *varlets à marier* or *compagnons* and *compagnons à marier*; their organizations were known as *bacheleries* (in the Poitou, Berry, the Angoumois, the Vendée, and elsewhere), Kingdoms of Youth, and in wide areas—Burgundy, the Dauphiné, Savoie, and the Midi—Abbeys of Youth (*Abbayes de la Jeunesse*).²⁶ Since village boys usually did not marry until their early or middle twenties in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries,²⁷ their period of *jeunesse* lasted a long time and the number of bachelors relative to the total number of men in the village was quite high. Each year before Lent, after Christmas, or at some other time, they elected a King or Abbot from among their midst.²⁸ The Abbey of Misrule was in its inception a youth group!

jurisdiction
Now these youth-abbeys had a surprising range of jurisdiction and festive responsibility. They met the youth of other parishes at Mardi Gras for *soules*, a violent football game, and at other times pitted their strength against the married men in their own village.²⁹ In the Fête des Brandons at the beginning of Lent it was they who bore the brands of blazing straw and jumped and danced to ensure the village's agricultural and sexual fertility for the coming year;

and at All Souls' Day it was they who rang the bells for the dead ancestors of the village.³⁰

The Abbeys had jurisdiction over villagers their own age, including marriageable girls,* in front of whose houses they planted May bushes (or a smelly bush, if they wished to suggest a girl's morals were dubious),³¹ and over young strangers coming to court their girls, whom they would fight or hold up for a fine.³² They had prescribed roles in the wedding ceremony, such as putting up chains across the path of the procession or bursting into the wedding chamber on some pretence—obstacles, like our western shivaree, to the consummation of the marriage that could be removed only by the payment of flowers, money, or a drink.³³

More important, the rural youth-abbeys had jurisdiction over the behavior of married people—over newlyweds when the wife had failed to become pregnant during the year, over husbands dominated by their wives, sometimes over adulterers. The penalties were in some villages ducking in water, in others a humiliating parade backwards on the ass or a charivari.³⁴ The earliest known French use of the term charivari† and the most frequent occasion for it in villages, however, was in connection with second marriages, especially when there was a gross disparity in age between the bride and groom.³⁵ Then the masked youth with their pots,

* The unmarried adolescent girls also had prescribed roles in rural festive life: they danced with the young men; they participated in May festivities; they sometimes went out with the young males on the New Year's "*quête de l'Aquilanneuf*" or "*Paguileneuf*" (corruption of "*au guy l'an neuf*" and deriving from the Druid collecting of the mistletoe; M. du Tilliot, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la Fête des Foux* [2d ed.; Lausanne and Geneva, 1751], pp. 67-71). Temporary Queens were also elected among the young unmarried women of the village at certain times of year, especially in May. But were the village girls organized into youth groups of their own? Van Gennep reports various *reinages* and confraternities of unmarried girls in honor of Saint Catherine (Arnold Van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français* [Paris, 1943-49], 1: 207-12), but gives no evidence that they existed in the countryside in the Middle Ages or sixteenth century.

† Van Gennep provides many variants for the word charivari in different parts of France: *chalivali*, *calvali*, *chanavari*, *coribari*, *kériboeéri*—even *hourvari* and others (*Manuel*, 1: 622 and 622, n. 2).

tambourines, bells, rattles, and horns might make their clamor for a week outside the house of their victims, unless they settled and paid a fine. Others in the village might join them, but it was the young men who took the initiative (see Plate 8).

Nor were these activities, as E. K. Chambers and others have claimed, a mere playing with primitive and magical customs of forgotten meaning. Rather they were a carnival treatment of reality, with an important function in the village. Let us take the question of second marriages. Canon law had long since overcome the scruples of the early Church Fathers about remarriage, and though no benediction was given the pair and the ceremony was held modestly at night, second and third marriages were completely licit. The church had dropped the old Roman prescription of a waiting period before remarriage—a loosening enthusiastically supported by feudal law—and there were no rules regarding disparity in age either, as long as the partners were sexually mature.³⁶

functions Why then the charivaris? First there was the dead spouse to be placated. He was sometimes present at the charivari as an effigy.³⁷ Then there were the children from the first marriage to be thought about, psychologically and economically. Folktales about the wicked stepmother or stepfather express the former worry; the latter one is reflected in the *coutumier* of Paris of 1510, which introduced legal restrictions on the woman who remarried in order to protect the revenues due to existing children.³⁸ And last and most fundamental, there was resentment when someone had been inappropriately removed by an older widow or widower from the pool of young eligibles.* In principle this jeopardized the chances of the village young to find a mate of a seemly age and also meant a marriage that was unlikely to produce many chil-

* Charivaris were especially violent when the remarriage involved a marked difference in age. Sometimes they did not occur if *both* of the spouses had been married before. Fines collected from lads from another village who came to court local girls and the fights that sometimes broke out on these occasions also reflect, in my view, a recognition of the threat to the pool of young eligibles.

dren.³⁹ In fact, with life expectancy as short as it was, remarriages were necessary and common. Thus the air could be cleared and the community reminded of the imbalance by a noisy mocking laugh at the "*Vieille Carcasse, folle d'amour*" ("old carcass, crazy with love"), or at the old man surely incapable of satisfying his young wife. The couple then acquitted themselves toward the village (and toward the young people who had not received the food and money of a traditional daytime ceremony) "*au triple de tes nocces*"—at three times the wedding costs, as one charivari chant demanded.⁴⁰

What then can we conclude about the character of Misrule in the French countryside in the late Middle Ages and sixteenth century? The use of the imagery of "Kingdoms" and especially of "Abbeys" not only provided a carnival reversal of status in regard to a faraway king or a nearby monastery, to whom peasants might owe services and dues, but—more important—provided a rule that the youth had over others and perhaps too a brotherhood existing among themselves; and it gave enormous scope to mockery and derision. But license was not rebellious. It was very much in the service of the village community, dramatizing the differences between different stages of life,⁴¹ clarifying the responsibilities that the youth would have when they were married men and fathers, helping to maintain proper order within marriage and to sustain the biological continuity of the village. Total violence or disorder in the course of Misrule was a mistake, an accident (so we learn from the brawls and murder cases that ultimately found their way to the royal courts); and when a rural carnival became political, it was turned, as we will see, not against the *laboureurs*, the rich peasants in the village, or the village elders, but against oppressors from without.

Thus the activities of the youth-abbeys functioned rather like rites de passage, here spaced over a number of years, in communities where the older generation's expectations for the young and the younger generation's expectations for themselves did not differ very much. They refute, incidentally, the assertion of Philippe

Ariès that Europeans made no distinction between childhood and adolescence before the end of the eighteenth century, that "people had no idea of what we call adolescence," that "there [was] no room for adolescence" in the earlier centuries.⁴² Though villagers obviously had no theory of the psychodynamics of male adolescent development, and though rural society did not stimulate the possibility of exploring alternate identities (except for the lad who decided to move to the city), nevertheless these youth groups played *certain* of the functions that we attribute to adolescence. They gave the youth rituals to help control their sexual instincts and also to allow themselves some limited sphere of jurisdiction or "autonomy" in the interval before they were married. They socialized them to the conscience of the community by making them the raucous voice of that conscience.* And it

* I follow here the definition of adolescence of Elizabeth Douvan and Joseph Adelson, *The Adolescent Experience* (New York, 1966), pp. 4-21, 346-47. The work of Philippe Ariès, Kenneth Keniston, and John and Virginia Demos has helped us understand the development of modern concepts of adolescence (see n. 42). But we should not reserve the term "adolescence" only for the forms and definitions which that stage of life enjoys in Western countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This seems especially important since the study of Douvan and Adelson on a very large American sample shows that some of the allegedly typical traits of adolescence—disaffection, *Sturm und Drang*—are characteristic of only a small percentage of adolescents even today (pp. 350-51). Thus one might better assume that adolescence, the period from the onset of puberty to the full assumption of adult roles, is given some recognition, however slight, in every society; and one might then examine systematically the different ways in which it is defined, valued, and organized. David Hunt has made a similar suggestion in regard to Ariès' treatment of infancy and early childhood (*Parents and Children in History. The Psychology of Family Life in Early Modern France* [New York, 1970], ch. 2).

In the preface to his new edition of *L'enfant et la vie familiale*, M. Ariès has considered some of the evidence presented in my essay (Paris, 1973, pp. vii-ix). He asks about the age of members of the youth-abbey, and points out that they were organizations of bachelors ("*célibataires*") at a period in history when men often married late. "The opposition was, then, between the married and the unmarried." As I have already suggested, the period of male *jeunesse* in the sixteenth-century countryside might well last from fourteen to the early twenties, but that does not mean that it was lacking in distinctive and youthful characteristics. Contemporaries thought of the word "*bachelier*"

should be noted that youth-abbey and youth-kingdoms with the same constellation of characteristics just described are found throughout rural Europe in Switzerland,⁴³ Germany,⁴⁴ Italy,⁴⁵ Hungary, Rumania,⁴⁶ and perhaps England and Scotland⁴⁷ and Spain.⁴⁸

Finally, these groups make us attend the message of the anthropologist André Varagnac and the sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt about the importance of age categories or age groups in the traditional rural community. As Eisenstadt says, "In primitive and traditional societies, youth groups are usually part of a wider organization of age groups that covers a very long period of life, from childhood to late adulthood and even old age."⁴⁹ They exist despite the economic differentiation among the peasants from rich *laboureur* to landless hired hand, and despite changes in the demographic pyramid.⁵⁰ Like parish institutions, they help explain how the peasant community defended its identity against the outside world.

[III]

The youth-abbey and youth-kingdoms had, of course, developed in French cities from the thirteenth century on. Whereas in the French countryside their basic organization and customs had changed very little even as late as the eighteenth century (they sometimes took on military functions without, however, dropping their other roles),⁵¹ in the cities, with the relative literacy and complexity of urban life, this festive form evolved and proliferated in important ways. Most obvious was the enrichment of the dramatic and literary content of Misrule, of the whole vocabulary of

as having an initial sense of "youth" ("a young adolescent, beginning to enter the age of manhood," Pierre Borel, *Dictionnaire des termes du vieux français* [Paris, 1750], p. 17; and the rites and festivities described above depended for their meaning both on the youthful and on the unmarried state of the actors. Finally, the number of older bachelors in a village was small relative to the number of youthful ones. There is some evidence suggesting that after a certain age, bachelors were not merely the butt of the village youth-abbey, but may have been assimilated in certain ways into the status of the married or widowed (A. Varagnac, *Civilisation traditionnelle et genres de vie* [Paris, 1948], pp. 99-100, 117-18, 253).

Folly. Whereas only a limited number of rural Abbeys called themselves Abbayes de Maugouvert, this and other merry and paradoxical titles multiplied in the cities, perhaps especially in the fifteenth century, when urban literacy rates began to rise somewhat. Whereas the rural drama accompanying charivaris is quite modest, when it occurs at all (usually a mere carrying around of effigies of the guilty parties or of the widow, her new husband, and dead spouse), now the dramatic productions are more elaborate (as we saw earlier in the floats mocking the martyred husbands of Lyon), and have verses to go with them. The village literary production consists of a simple charivari song; the urban verses are more complex and contributed to the development of the *sottie* style and the *coq à l'asne* (poetic dialogue that jumps from one thing to another). Whereas the rural player might deck himself out on the spur of the moment (we have a wonderful picture from the royal pardons of a fifteenth-century miller's son, an *homme joyeux*, improvising a messenger's outfit so that he could quickly deliver a message to a harvest queen), the urban players fabricate complicated and sometimes sumptuous costumes.⁵² And finally, the rural Abbeys left their Misrule to memory alone; the city Abbeys of the sixteenth century often put theirs down in print.⁵³

There were changes in the organization of the Abbeys as well, changes in their social and age composition. Even a city of 6,000 is too big for a single Abbey. By the sixteenth century, Lyon, with its population growing up to 60,000, had about twenty of them, with a full range of Abbots, Barons, Captains, Admirals, Princes, Counts, Princesses, Judges, and Patriarchs of Misrule at their head. Though organized separately, they called each other out and paraded together at feast time. Most of them were organized around the quarter or neighborhood, and the same seems to have been partly true of Rouen.⁵⁴

In some cases the distinctive functions of the Abbey—of carnival misrule, of charivari and jurisdiction over domestic affairs and community morals—were taken up and transformed by occu-

pational groupings. Thus the Basoche, the organization of the law clerks (originally the young members of the profession) in Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux, and other French cities, developed with officers called Abbots, Kings, and Princes, planted May bushes, pleaded mock cases, and put on public comedies and farces at Mardi Gras in which real persons, in their jurisdiction and out of it, were represented and their faults derided.⁵⁵ Thus in sixteenth-century Lyon, the printers' journeymen acted as an Abbey of Misrule, with the Lord of Misprint (*Seigneur de la Coquille*) as its leader; the painters elected a Judge of Fools and the silk-dyers' journeymen a Captain of Misrule.⁵⁶

Furthermore, and very significant, the urban Abbeys, especially in the large cities, were no longer necessarily organizations of unmarried youth as they had been in the villages. In Rouen there were enough married men in the Abbey of Conards in 1541 for the Abbot to issue a mock proclamation that any Conard with a wife confined in childbirth could provide for himself with a serving-girl or neighbor-woman. In Dijon at the end of the century, a well-known lawyer was elected as Mère Folle regularly until his death, when he was succeeded by his son-in-law.⁵⁷ (For Mère Folle's costume and chariot, see Plate 6). Only in smaller towns like Chalon-sur-Saône does the complete identity between Abbey and youth regularly remain.⁵⁸ Elsewhere the idea of youth lingers on in names like the *Infanterie Dijonnaise* or the *Enfants-sans-souci* (a former youth-abbey that had evolved especially in Paris into a semiprofessional players' group⁵⁹), or the youth groups are confined (1) to a limited social category, as in Lyon or Rouen, where the *Enfants de la Ville* are the sons of municipal magistrates,⁶⁰ or (2) to limited functions, as in Geneva, where the *Abbaye des Enfants*, once in charge of dances, mummeries, and masking, formed the basis of the urban militia established at the end of the fifteenth century.⁶¹

Why does this happen? Why do traditional festive organizations often lose their age-specificity in the big sixteenth-century cities, outside the college⁶² and the urban patriciate? It was not

Urban
Changes

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because city people stopped recognizing that there was a period of adolescence—here again I am taking issue with Philippe Ariès⁶³—for medical literature, religious manuals, and popular prints distinguish it and recognize it as a period of sexual maturation.* As Eisenstadt points out, “However great the differences among various societies, there is one focal point within the life span of an individual which in most known societies is to some extent emphasized: the period of youth, of transition from childhood to full adult status, or full membership in the society.” What differs from society to society and from sector to sector within a society, he goes on, is “the extent to which age in general and youth in

* Sixteenth-century medical literature said that on the average puberty begins for males at 14, and that “l’age d’adolescence” usually lasts from 14 to 20 or 21, being a period of “natural robustness” in which exercise is important (Laurent Joubert, *Erreurs populaires au fait de la médecine et régime de santé . . . la première partie* [Bordeaux, 1578], Book II, chap. 2; Hierosme de Monteux, *Commentaire de la conservation de santé* [Lyon, 1559], pp. 202-3). Prints representing the stages of life, as M. Ariès points out himself, show the older adolescent in the process of courting. Though the long debate over the precise age at which children should begin to confess and receive the sacrament of penance was still unresolved at the Council of Trent, theologians always stated that sexual sins could start occurring only around the age of fourteen. Confessors’ manuals attended to the voluptuous thoughts of the teenager and his desire to touch others, and college rulings separated the 16-year-olds from the boys aged 8 or 9 for similar reasons. See H. C. Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church* (Philadelphia, 1896), 1: 400-404; Jean Gerson, “Brève manière de confession pour les jeunes,” *Opera omnia*, ed. Mr. Glorieux (Paris, 1966), 7: 408-9; Astrik Gabriel, *Student Life in Ave Maria College, Mediaeval Paris* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1955), p. 105. Another kind of distinction between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood is made by the liberal Protestant Sébastien Castellion in his description of the stages of God’s education of the human race. During the Age of Law, or of the Father, God commands mankind as a father does the young child, expecting only outward obedience; during the Age of the Gospel, or of the Son, Christ brings adolescent humanity instruction through the Gospel; during the Age of the Holy Ghost, the adult man is directed by the perfect inspiration of the Spirit (F. Buisson, *Sébastien Castellion* [Paris, 1892], 2: 193-97). See also the discussion of the distinctive perils and joys of the years from puberty to marriage in Charles V. Langlois, *La vie en France au moyen âge* (Paris, 1925), 2: 217-25. The characterization of adolescent development in these works is not exactly the same as would be made today, but it is a characterization!

particular form a criterion for the allocation of roles . . . [and] the extent to which [there] develop specific age groups, specific corporate organizations, composed of members of the same ‘age.’ ”⁶⁴ Now sixteenth-century cities continued to see informal groupings such as street gangs of males in their teens who played games and threw stones at neighborhood enemies. But the character of economic and social life made it likely that male adolescents would be organized into groups either with adults or more directly dominated by adults than were the village Abbeys.

Let us consider the craft world. The median age for apprenticeship in sixteenth-century French cities was twelve (later than in the fourteenth century, it would get later still in the seventeenth).⁶⁵ Sometime in his middle or late teens the apprentice became a journeyman. Then he might become part of his master’s guild, in a wholly dependent status of course, or he might be initiated into a secret journeymen’s organization in which there would be journeymen of all ages. Here the rite de passage led to an economic status, not a new stage of life.

The *compagnon à marier* in the countryside might well grow up and marry; the *compagnon imprimeur* in the city might well remain a dependent worker for years and years.⁶⁶

As for the poor and the unskilled, we have little information about their social life, though we know that their children had to go to work early and that the beggars’ kingdom encompassed young and old alike. The militia in most places at this period was also made up of men of different ages.⁶⁷

Where the traditional youth group persists in the large sixteenth-century city—among the sons of rich lawyers, merchants, and magistrates—much of the Misrule is missing. In Lyon, the Enfants de la Ville might get into a brawl to avenge the honor of one of their number, but they dropped their titular Abbot and their charivaris shortly after 1500. The city fathers could hardly allow their own sons to bruit their *mauvais ménage* throughout the town. And anyway the *sottie* verse forms of the charivari, the rhymes in the Lyonnais dialect, the crude parade on the ass seemed

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craft world

hopelessly old-fashioned to young men who were being taught by rich Italian bankers resident in Lyon to play ancient Roman games and to mask in classical fashion. So the Enfants took their place in the official ceremonies that their fathers organized for visiting dignitaries, played their appointed role in society weddings, supported a confraternity, and organized banquets for the best ladies in town. This youth group served less to prepare them for the way of life of a married man, and more to confirm their participation in an exclusive social circle.⁶⁸

Thus the characteristic Abbeys of Misrule in the large sixteenth-century city were professional or more likely neighborhood groupings, which encompassed men* both young and old. They also differed from the rural Abbeys in the range of their social composition. Whereas in the village, the youth-abbeys could include the sons of well-off peasants and landless ones, in the sixteenth-century French city, not even within the individual neighborhood could men from all estates be drawn together in a festive organization. The urban elite would be missing from the Abbey and had their own entertainments, as would the unskilled *gagnedenier* (day workers); certain classes of newcomers and foreign residents might be excluded too. In Nice, four Abbots were elected separately by "nobles," merchants, artisans, and a group of urban gardeners and fishermen.⁶⁹ In Lyon, the Abbeys were made up

* As in the countryside, membership in the Abbeys was confined to males. All of the officers with female names were men who dressed as women (see Chapter 5). Women participated in and watched the festivities, of course. In the 1541 parade in Rouen, the Conards visited women, danced with them, and gave them sweets and flowers. In the 1566 *chevauchée de l'âne* at Lyon, some real women paraded in female costumes along with the Abbeys, that is, twelve women dressed as "Egyptiennes." The closest we come to festive organizations for females are temporary Queens, as in Abbeville from the fourteenth century on, where Queens were elected in every quarter on Easter Tuesday (R. Vaultier, *Le folklore pendant la Guerre de Cent Ans d'après les lettres de rémission du Trésor des Chartes* [Paris, 1965], pp. 61-62). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, French brothels were sometimes called "Abbeyes," with an Abbess at their head, but these were pleasure organizations of quite another kind.

of artisans and small and medium merchants. The Judge of Fools in 1534 was a painter, who ended up on the city poor-relief rolls.⁷⁰ The literary output of Rouen's Abbey of Conards suggests that a higher percentage of educated men participated there than in Lyon, but the Conards were still not drawn from the "best families." Of two known important Conards, one was a process-server for the Parlement of Rouen, the other a miller.⁷¹ Dijon's *Infanterie* had members of high status at the end of the sixteenth century, including lawyers in the Parlement of Dijon; but earlier a simple tailor was able to start *Mère Folle* on one of her promenades, and there is some evidence that even wine-growers living in the city took part.⁷²

The fragmenting of festive organizations in the cities, the limiting of the Kingdom of Misrule, was a consequence of urban growth, of vocational differentiation, and of changes in economic and social structure. But just because there was so much innovation and disorder, the Abbeys had a new role to play in the city. A neighborhood grouping can be more coherent and informative than an age grouping on a busy street, with families jammed into every story of the house, *haute, moyenne, et basse*. A notarized account of a May 1517 meeting of 42 members of the Abbey of Misrule of the rue Mercière in Lyon (I came on it in the archives;⁷³ it may be the only such document yet found) shows them electing a Captain and Lieutenant and setting up councillors to "govern" the street and "keep peace and amity" among the members. Fines were collected when the Abbey's rules were broken in regard to swearing and blasphemy (good signs that a fight was brewing); and in severe cases, members could be banned from the Abbey. This peace-keeping function is not unique to Lyon. The fifteenth-century statutes of the Abbey of Fools of Turin say members are to keep themselves in peace and love, eliminating all dissension that might develop among them.⁷⁴ The intervention of Rouen's Abbot of Conards in a literary quarrel between two poets was intended not to support one side, but to bring peace between the two:

Parquoy enfants . . . [says the Abbot]
 Pour éviter querelles et debatz
 Je vous defendz toute iniure intedicté . . .
 Vous mettre en paix. . .⁷⁶

The Abbeyes also carried on charivaris, as we have seen, in familiar circumstances and also in circumstances the village passed over in silence. We catch the Abbey of the rue Mercière in Lyon planning a parade on the ass against a well-off tanner in the neighborhood about whose recent beating by his wife "we have made good and sufficient inquiry." This *chevauchée* was needed "in order to repress the temerity and audacity of women who beat their husbands and of those who would like to do so; for according to the provision of divine and civil law, the wife is subject to the husband; and if husbands suffer themselves to be governed by their wives, they might as well be led out to pasture." Anyway it is the month of May now, the 1517 report goes on, and this season requires frolics and diversion.⁷⁶

Here again we have the loud and mocking laugh of Misrule intended to keep a traditional order. Interestingly enough, while charivaris against second marriages were central in country misrule, in the cities charivaris against domineering wives were the most frequent.* Grotesque disparities in age between bride and groom could still scandalize the city-dwellers. (Claude de Rubys recalled not only the hubbub of pots and pans but also the wooden cannon with which the newly married widow or widower was "besieged" in his house in Lyon.)⁷⁷ But remarriage in the city represented less of a threat to the pool of young eligibles than in the countryside, for population size and patterns of mortality and migration assured a better supply of mates of appropriate social background in the city. Further, widows may have found it easier

* Rabelais passes over second marriages with an anticlerical joke, but dwells on the husband-beater. "At the creation of the world, or a little after, the women conspired together to flay the men alive for trying to lord it over them everywhere." Panurge worries about marrying such a woman and plans to beat her instead (*Le Tiers Livre*, chaps. 6, 9, 12, 14, 18).

in the French city to maintain households on their own, as has been recently shown to be the case in fifteenth-century Tuscan towns. In addition, there were important and little-understood changes going on in the relations between men and women in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, reflected in the charivaris against henpecked husbands, in the worsening position of women in French law,⁷⁸ and in the independent interest of some city women in Protestantism.

The city charivari was used to mark other affronts to the sense of order or justice of the neighborhood. To quote a later writer on the Mère Folle of Dijon: "If anything singular occurred in town, like thefts, murders, bizarre marriages, seductions, then the Chariot and the Infantry got on foot; people in the troupe were dressed the same as those to whom the thing had happened and represented them realistically." In Amiens grocers who sold false wax were likely victims. Indeed any "vicious deed" might prompt the horns of the Conards of Rouen.⁷⁹

Not surprisingly, the charivari and carnival license to deride could also be turned against the political authorities, and with the changed social and age composition of the urban Abbeyes it sometimes was. Those Judges of Misrule, that company of Princes, Patriarchs, and Bishops, were more likely to direct their barbs at the powerful than was the young village Abbot. It was not the domestic disorder of the governing families that was criticized, but rather their political misrule. And this was an important channel for criticism in those oligarchical cities, where even rather substantial artisans and merchants had little, if any, chance to make political decisions.

The relations of the Abbeyes to city councils, Parlements, and kings were more complex and ambivalent than that of the court fool to his king. If the Parlements of Rouen and Grenoble sometimes tolerated charivaris, there are decrees of the Parlements of Toulouse and Dijon against them. The Consulate of Lyon and royal officials there instituted proceedings against the Abbey of the rue Mercière because it had established a jurisdiction infring-

ing on their prerogatives; whereas in Orange the town council allowed the Abbey its charivaris so long as it turned over part of the fines collected to the city. There are numerous royal and local edicts against masking and mumming, all intended to protect the cities and the king himself against brawling and fighting, conspiracy, and seditious activity.⁸⁰ In short, the Abbeys survived under a kind of legal sufferance—at their easiest moments, as in Rouen, receiving yearly license from the Parlement for their Misrule and even being invited to join the Entry Parade honoring Henri II; at their most difficult, again in Rouen, having their Abbot arrested by the sergeants right off his festive float in 1541 because it attacked the city fathers too sharply.⁸¹

The Mardi Gras revels at Rouen illustrate well the possibilities of political criticism and commentary. One year they dramatized the venality of specific local magistrates who had demanded a large sum from a pleader instead of the modest hare he offered them; the judges claimed their wives did not like to eat game.⁸² The Mardi Gras parade of 1540 was less personal, the political observation more general or veiled. We hold up “a Socratic mirror” to the world, said the Abbot. Business was so bad that the procession began with an elaborate funeral for Merchandise, followed by a float bearing Hope in a laughing and joyous mask. Another float bore a king, the pope, the emperor, and a fool playing catch with the globe of the world: “*Tiens-cy; baille-ça, Ris-t’en, Moque-t’en.*” There was also a procession of Old Testament prophets uttering prophetic riddles with reference to current political responsibility for pauperization and religious troubles.⁸³

In Paris the king might be attacked under his very nose, as in 1516, when the Basoche put on a farce demonstrating that Mère Sotte reigned at court and that she was taxing, pillaging, and stealing everything. At Dijon, the 1576 *Anèrie* of Mère Folle and her children ridiculed the king’s Grand Master of Streams and Forests in Burgundy not only for beating his wife in May, but also for devastating for his own profit the forests he was supposed to protect.⁸⁴ In Lyon the Lord of Misprint and his band used their carnival license in the 1580’s to protest the folly of religious war, the

high cost of bread, and the empty stalls of the merchants. Like the verses of the Abbey of Conards, these were printed at the time of the festival and brought this carnival criticism to the attention of those who had not heard it.⁸⁵

These elements of political and social criticism in the midst of carnival were intended to destroy-and-renew political life in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense, but not to lead directly to further political action. There are fascinating examples, however, in both city and countryside, of carnivals where the tension between the festive and everyday official realms was broken and uprising and rebellion ensued. Sometimes this was partially planned ahead of time, sometimes it was spontaneous. Thus in 1513, three hundred young peasants from villages near Berne, Switzerland, marched on the city after some June revels to punish the “*mangeurs de couronnes*” and sacked it.⁸⁶ During the revolt of the Netherlands, in Cambrai (where the Abbé de L’Escache-Profit and other dignitaries held court) the rebels were costumed and carried fools’ scepters with the head of the hated governor Cardinal Granvelle.⁸⁷ In sixteenth-century France in the Côtes du Rhône region, E. Le Roy Ladurie reports that “the societies of youth in the parishes . . . [were] the cells for insurrection.” Indeed, an entire uprising and its terrible suppression occurred in the course of the Mardi Gras carnival of 1580 at Romans, “a long series of symbolic actions” ending in blood.⁸⁸

Finally, a 1630 uprising in Dijon against royal tax officers took the form of a masquerade; Mère Folle and her Infanterie were implicated and the Abbey was abolished by an angry but punning royal edict.⁸⁹

The relationship between popular festivals and politics clearly warrants further study, and so does their relation to religious institutions and movements. Here I will outline only a few of the major questions. The Abbeys’ relations with the Catholic Church were as complex and ambivalent as with the secular authorities. Charivaris against second marriages were regularly forbidden by French provincial synods from the thirteenth century on.⁹⁰ But there was no systematic attempt before the mid-seventeenth cen-

tury to do away with Abbeys of Misrule, as there had been with the campaign of the Paris Theology Faculty against the clerical Feast of Fools. Catholic reformers with humanist tastes (like Guillaume Paradin, dean of Beaujeu) might fume about the pagan and superstitious elements in the popular recreations and cite the writings of the early Fathers against masking and mumming as vicious and unnatural activities.⁹¹ But the church simply prohibited masked indecency within church buildings or cemeteries, letting it go on elsewhere. The canons of the cathedral of Rouen reacted punitively only when Conards carried around scandalous effigies of two of *them* during Mardi Gras.⁹²

The Protestant response was different. Interestingly enough, the youth-abbeys in the Savoie and in Switzerland, the Fools in Geneva, and the Enfants-sans-souci in some towns in the Guyenne were early supporters of the new religion and integrated Protestant themes into their festivities.⁹³ Once the Reformation was established, however, the new church was fair game: thus the youth-abbey of Lausanne mocked the Consistory for imprisoning two prostitutes in the 1540's.⁹⁴ Pastors and Consistories then tried hard to stamp out the Abbeys and all their customs in Reformed Switzerland and in any French towns that fell under their control during the Religious Wars. For instance, the author of the Calvinist *Histoire ecclésiastique* recounts with pride that at Mardi Gras, 1562, just before the Protestant Revolution in Rouen, the Conards tried to put on their usual "insolent masquerades," but the evangelical *menu peuple* stopped them by throwing stones at them.⁹⁵

The Calvinist antipathy to the Abbeys was not owing, of course, *just* to their insolence and mockery. It was part of a deeper hostility to the whole psychology of two worlds, of two levels upon which life could be lived.⁹⁶ "This-worldly asceticism," in Max Weber's phrase, offered many choices to Protestants, but all of them were to be made within the same serious time scheme. Only within the solemn halls of the Consistory could criticism be given of morals and marriages, of men who beat their wives (yes, it was the other way around in Geneva—and not just during the month of May⁹⁷). Laughter and charivari could be used only to over-

turn the Catholic enemy; even revolutions should be carried on with decorum. Popular iconoclasm was wrong, said Calvin, as were rollicking parades bearing the relics seized from the Roman churches. Stones and bones must be removed and registered by the authorities.⁹⁸ As one might expect, the Consistories had a hard time doing away with this festive life: in the mid-seventeenth century, Misrule Abbeys and charivaris against beaten husbands were still being punished in Geneva, and there were signs of the Abbeys in Protestant rural areas as late as the nineteenth century.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, in the last part of the sixteenth century, despite the puritan streak in Counter-Reformation sensibility, some Catholic authorities in France began to perceive the value of Misrule to their cause. Here I refer not to the harnessing of carnival color and festive spirit to the religious processions of the Holy Catholic League in Paris, but rather to the utilization of the Abbeys themselves. After all, some of them actually had chapels and organized confraternities,¹⁰⁰ many of their revels were timed to the feast days the Protestants had abolished, and the existence of festive Abbots could be taken to suggest that there were serious abbots as well. The charivaris against domineering women in Lyon in the 1560's seemed to mock not only monstrous wives, but those monstrous women who had so recently been badgering and insulting priests in the streets of the city.¹⁰¹ The lawyer Claude de Rubys, the ardent League supporter with whose quotation I began this essay, encouraged the Abbey festivals and all efforts to inject Catholic propaganda into them. In fact the Abbeys were harder to capture than he realized (both in Lyon and Rouen they were ultimately opposed to the League), but then Folly always is.¹⁰²

[IV]

In my own attempt to seize Misrule, I have tried to relate it to several things: to the history of youth groups; to the history of social forms among the lower orders; and to the problem of play and its functions. First, I have taken a group of disparate festive customs and organizations in sixteenth-century cities and have shown that they derive not merely from Roman or primitive

sources, but from a cluster of festive roles assigned primarily to the organization of young unmarried men in the village. Although the traditional youth group lasted for a very long time in the countryside and to some extent in smaller towns, the conditions of big-city life were dissolving it by the sixteenth century, except in the colleges and the urban upper class, in favor of formal groupings based on profession or occupation or neighborhood or class. As far as I know, it was not until the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century that there appeared fully articulated the variety of youth movements and youth groups of a "modern" kind, which respond to feelings of discontinuity between childhood and the adult world.¹⁰³ To be sure, the Reformation in its *early* decades, with its attack on the paternal authority of the clergy and its imagery of the young Christian combating the old doctor of theology, sometimes seems to have the character of a youth movement; but it gave birth to no genuine youth organizations.

Meanwhile, the festive Abbeys did not atrophy, but were maintained and transformed by craftsmen, merchants, and lawyers. The Abbeys' rule was extended to cope with new situations—to keep peace and just order among neighbors in a growing city. Their Misrule was enriched dramatically, and to their old function of maintaining order in the family was added a new one of political criticism. I am struck here, as I was earlier in studying the formation of *compagnonnages*,¹⁰⁴ by the social creativity of the so-called inarticulate, by the way in which they seize upon older social forms and change them to fit their needs.

As for theories of play, I have stressed the rule and rationale in popular festivals and the extent to which they remain in close touch with the realities of community and marriage. These are natural consequences of the carnival license to deride and the historical nature of festive organizations. It is an exaggeration to view the carnival and Misrule as merely a "safety valve," as merely a primitive, prepolitical form of recreation. Victor Turner and Mikhail Bakhtin are closer to the truth in seeing it as present in

all cultures. I would say not only that it is present, but that the structure of the carnival form can evolve so that it can act both to reinforce order and to suggest alternatives to the existing order. (Eric Hobsbawm in his *Primitive Rebels* has evaluated the transformational capacities of millenarian movements in a similar way.)¹⁰⁵ The urban Abbeys of Misrule lost much of their vitality by the eighteenth century, but along the way they had called on members of the lower orders to noise their political complaints. Indeed charivaris of a political nature are found in city and countryside into the nineteenth century. It is no accident that the celebrated satirical newspaper in which Daumier published his cartoons—founded in 1832 and prosecuted twenty times by Louis Philippe's government—was entitled *Charivari*.¹⁰⁶

Finally, to literary specialists I may have offered a new source for comedy, and perhaps for tragedy, too. C. L. Barber has talked of some of Shakespeare's plays as saturnalia; is Hamlet perhaps a charivari of the young against a grotesque and unseemly remarriage, a charivari where the effigy of the dead spouse returns, the vicious action is replayed? And perhaps we have in the Abbeys of Misrule another source for Rabelais' Abbaye de Thélème.¹⁰⁷

But enough reasons for Misrule. Readers will have to decide whether all I have said is folly. If so, I will try to answer. Or then again I might not, and claim as did Erasmus' Queen of Misrule that I have forgotten "all that I have spoken, after such a rabblement of words poured forth." No matter. I say now with Erasmus' Stultitia, "Fare ye well. Clap your hands in token of gladness, live careless and drink all out, ye the trusty servants and solemn ministers of folly."

Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe

Second Edition

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2 The female life-cycle

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages...

Jacques in William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 7

All women are thought of as either married or to be married.

Anonymous, *The lawes resolution of women's rights*, (London, 1632), fol. 6.

Beginning with the ancient Greeks, and perhaps earlier, western scholars debated about how many stages made up a man's life. Some argued for four, corresponding to the four seasons, some twelve, corresponding to the months and the signs of the zodiac, and some three, five, six, eight, or ten. The number that was increasingly accepted was seven, corresponding to the seven known planets (the planets out to Saturn plus the moon), and identified by St. Ambrose in the fourth century as infancy, boyhood, adolescence, young manhood, mature manhood, older manhood, and old age. Discussions of the "ages of man" abounded in the Middle Ages and early modern period, and the stages were depicted in manuscript illuminations, stained-glass windows, wall paintings, and cathedral floors, so that people who did not read were also familiar with them.

The seven ages of man began with stages of physical and emotional maturing, and then were differentiated by increasing and decreasing involvement in the world of work and public affairs. As men moved from one stage to another, they were shown with different objects symbolizing changing occupations or responsibilities. For men, in only the third stage, adolescence, was sexuality a factor, and marriage or fatherhood were almost never viewed as significant.

Most written discussions of the ages of man never mention women at all; even Jacques, who begins by talking about men and women on the stage of life, goes on to describe a male life-cycle. People did talk less formally about the stages of a woman's life, however, and when they did it

was her sexual status and relationship to a man that mattered most, as the second quotation above makes clear. A woman was a virgin, wife, or widow, or alternately a daughter, wife, or mother. The visual depictions of the ages of man which show couples demonstrate the difficulties artists faced in trying to show stages in an adult woman's life, for though men are depicted as gaining status and authority in their occupations until old age, adult women of all ages are simply portrayed with spindles.

This difference in conceptualization both reflected and shaped social reality. For the vast majority of women in early modern Europe, the most important change in their lives was marriage. The choice of a spouse, whether made by themselves or their parents or a larger kin group, determined their social and economic status and place of residence. Though an early modern woman did not generally look to her husband for the same level of emotional intimacy and support that a contemporary western woman does, she certainly hoped that day-to-day life with him would be pleasant and that he would not physically or emotionally abuse her. Because divorce was either impossible or very difficult for women to obtain, and even living apart from an abusive spouse was illegal without court approval, the only possible relief from an unpleasant marriage was the death of a spouse, over which a woman, of course, had no control. It was the death of her husband, rather than any development in her own life, which moved a woman from one stage of life to another. Because this might happen at any age, and because remarriage meant a woman returned to the status of wife, the "ages of woman" correspond much less to her chronological age than the "ages of man" do to a man's. Though we might regard the early modern conceptualization of the female life-cycle as overly physical and marriage-oriented, lending too little credence to women's intellects or decisions, we will follow that conceptualization in this chapter, because corporeal accidents such as births and deaths not only shaped a woman's physical state, but her emotional health, economic position, opportunities for education, and status in the community.

Childhood and adolescence

The earliest studies of childhood in the early modern period, undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s, argued that childhood was not recognized as a distinct stage in life, and that children were raised harshly or regarded with indifference. These views were derived largely from child-raising manuals that advocated strict discipline and warned against coddling or showing too much affection and portraits of children which showed them dressed as little adults. This bleak view has been relieved somewhat

in the last several decades by scholars using archival sources about the way children were actually treated; they have discovered that many parents showed great affection for their children and were very disturbed when they died young. Parents tried to protect their children with religious amulets and pilgrimages to special shrines, made toys for them, and sang them lullabies. Even practices that to us may seem cruel, such as tight swaddling, were motivated by a concern for the child's safety and health at a time when most households had open fires, domestic animals wandered freely, and mothers and older siblings engaged in productive work which prevented them from continually watching a toddler.

The attitudes about the relative value of men and women and the inheritance laws described in the last chapter led early modern parents to favor the birth of sons over daughters. Jewish women prayed for sons, and German midwives were often rewarded with a higher payment for assisting in the birth of a boy. English women's letters sometimes apologize for the birth of daughters. Girls significantly outnumbered boys in most orphanages or foundling homes, as poor parents decided their sons would ultimately be more useful; infants had a much poorer chance of survival in such institutions than among the population at large. An interesting exception to this is London, where more boys were abandoned than girls. Study of the London records from 1550 to 1800 indicates that infants were generally abandoned when they were more than a month old, rather than the several days that was common elsewhere in Europe, so that mothers may have become much more attached to them than they were at birth, and chose to abandon those children – the boys – who would be likely to receive better care and have a greater chance of survival. Infanticide statistics do not allow us to assess whether girls were more likely to be killed than boys, as court records generally simply refer to "child" or "infant," and the number of infanticides by the early modern period was not high enough to have affected the sex ratio among the population at large even if there was a greater likelihood for girls to be victims.

It is also very difficult to know how much differentiation by gender there was in the treatment of most infants and small children. Though society had sharply defined gender roles for adults, children were all dressed alike for the first several years of their lives (there is no early modern equivalent of the pink and blue dichotomy), and comments by parents about their small children show less gender stereotyping than is evident among many contemporary parents. It was when children began their training for adult life, at the age of four or five, that clear distinctions became evident. Girls of all classes were taught skills that they would use in running a household – spinning, sewing, cooking, care of

domestic animals; peasant girls were also taught some types of agricultural tasks. As we will see in Chapter 4, they were much less likely than their brothers to be taught to read or to receive any formal schooling; the depictions of the ages of man which show both sexes portray the female in the second age spinning, and the male reading.

The onset of menstruation, termed menarche in modern English and "the flowers" in the sixteenth century, provided a girl with the clearest signal of bodily changes leading to adulthood. We know that the average age at menarche has declined in the western world for the last century, from about 15.5 in the 1890s to less than 13 today, but it is not clear that the average age in the early modern period was significantly higher than that in the nineteenth century. In fact, it may even have been lower, because age at menarche is affected by nutrition and other environmental factors, and many girls in the nineteenth century had a poorer diet and performed more physically debilitating work than those of earlier centuries. Somewhere around fourteen was probably about average, with poorer girls starting later than wealthier ones.

Because the actual biological function of menstruation had not yet been discovered, menstruation was viewed medically as either a process that purified women's blood or that removed excess blood from their bodies. As we saw in the last chapter, the humoral theory regarded all bodily fluids as related, and doctors recommended bloodletting as a treatment for disease in both men and women. Because of this, menstruation was not clearly separated from other types of bleeding in people's minds, and was often compared to male nosebleeds or hemorrhoids or other examples of spontaneous bleeding. Menstrual blood was thought to nourish the fetus during pregnancy, and because the body was regarded as capable of transforming one sort of fluid into another, to become milk during lactation. (In the same way, male blood was held to become semen during intercourse.) Semen and milk were not viewed as gender-specific fluids, however, for "virile" women who had more bodily heat than normal were seen as capable of producing semen, and effeminate men who lacked normal masculine heat were thought to lactate.

The cessation of menstruation (amenorrhea) was regarded as extremely dangerous for a woman, either because it left impure blood in her which might harden into an abnormal growth, or because it would allow excess blood to run to her brain, which would become overheated. (The opposite idea would be cited as a reason for barring women from higher education in the nineteenth century; education would cause all their blood to remain in their brains, which would halt menstruation and eventually cause the uterus to shrivel away.) Thus doctors recommended

hot baths, medicines, pessaries placed in the vagina, and, for married women, frequent intercourse, to bring on a late menstrual period.

Menstruation was not simply a medical matter, however, but carried a great many religious and popular taboos, for though all bodily fluids were seen as related, menstrual blood was still generally viewed as somehow different and dangerous. Hebrew Scripture held that menstruation made a woman ritually impure, so that everything she touched was unclean and her presence was to be avoided by all. By the early modern period in Jewish communities, this taboo was limited to sexual relations and a few other contacts between wife and husband for the seven days of her period and seven days afterwards. At the end of this time, a woman was expected to take a ritual bath (*mikvah*) before beginning sexual relations again. Among the Orthodox Slavs in eastern Europe, menstruating women could not enter churches or take communion. Western Christian churches were a bit milder, but canon lawyers and other Catholic and Protestant commentators advised against sexual relations during menstruation. This was originally based strictly on the religious notion that women were unclean during this period, though during the sixteenth century the idea spread that this was medically unwise as it would result in deformed or leprous children. Menstruation was used to symbolize religious practices with which one did not agree, with English Protestants, for example, calling the soul of the pope a "menstruous rag." According to popular beliefs, menstruating women could by their touch, glance, or mere presence rust iron, turn wine sour, spoil meat, or dull knives. Though these ideas declined among educated Europeans during the seventeenth century, they are recorded well into the twentieth century among many population groups.

What women themselves thought of menstruation is more difficult to ascertain than male religious or medical opinion. One of the few direct comments by a woman comes from the autobiography of Isabella de Moerloose, published in Amsterdam in 1695, in which she writes that she asked her husband to sleep separately while she was menstruating because "the stink will cause thee to feel aversion for me." He would not allow it because he feared people might think they were Jews, though he, too, commented that he was "so terribly disgusted" by the smell.¹ Women's handwritten personal medical guides, small books in which they recorded recipes for cures and other household hints, include

¹ Isabella de Moerloose, *Gegeven van den Hemel door Vrouwen Zaet...* (Amsterdam, 1695), quoted in Herman W. Roodenbuerg, "The autobiography of Isabella de Moerloose: sex, childrearing and popular beliefs in seventeenth-century Holland," *Journal of Social History* 18 (1985), 529.

recipes for mixtures to bring on a late menses and to stop overly-strong flow. Women turned to midwives and other women for help with a variety of menstrual ailments, and by the eighteenth century they also consulted male physicians. Physicians' case books from the early eighteenth century indicate that women worried most when menstruation ceased unexpectedly, especially if they thought something other than pregnancy was the cause. They requested the physician prescribe something to get the "flow" started again, because regular menstruation was a sign that all the fluids in the body were flowing as they should. Most women seemed to view menstruation not as an illness or a sign of divine displeasure, but as a normal part of life; only in the nineteenth century would normal menstruation come to be regarded as pathological. Though calling someone a "menstrual rag" was a serious insult, washing out one's own (or, if one was a servant, one's employers') menstrual rags were as much a part of women's lives as washing soiled infant clothing.

Sexuality

Learned opinion about menstruation was closely related with attitudes toward female sexuality in general, which were also a mixture of medical and religious opinion. In medical terms, male sexuality was the baseline for any perception of human sexuality, and the female sex organs were viewed as the male turned inside out or simply not pushed out. The great sixteenth-century anatomist Vesalius depicted the uterus looking exactly like an inverted penis, and his student Baldasar Heseler commented: "The organs of procreation are the same in the male and the female... For if you turn the scrotum, the testicles and the penis inside out you will have all the genital organs of the female."² This view of the correspondence between male and female sexual organs survived the Renaissance discovery of the clitoris, with scientists simply deciding that women had two structures which were like a penis. This idea meant that there was no precise nomenclature for many female anatomical parts until the eighteenth century because they were always thought to be congruent with some male part, and so were simply called by the same name.

The fact that the female sex organs were inside was viewed as a sign of female inferiority, of women's colder and damper nature which had not produced the heat necessary to push them out. The parallels between the two could lead to unusual sex changes, for many medical

doctors throughout Europe solemnly reported cases of young women whose sex organs suddenly emerged during vigorous physical activity, transforming them into men; there are no reports of the opposite, however. Because female sex organs were hidden, they seemed more mysterious than male organs to early modern physicians and anatomists, and anatomical guidebooks use illustrations of autopsies on women's lower bodies as symbols of modern science uncovering the unknown.

Judging by early modern sex manuals, female sexuality was also viewed negatively in popular opinion. Two of the most frequently published were *Aristotle's Master-Piece*, in English, first published in 1684, and *Venus Minsieke Gasthuis*, published in French and Dutch in Amsterdam in the 1680s. Both of these link female sexuality in text and illustrations with animals, and see women as sexually insatiable, as witnessed by their ability to have multiple orgasms. Unlike the spermaticists' view of the essentially passive role of women in procreation, these manuals regard female orgasm as necessary for procreation, for only through this would female "seed" be released. (Yet another example of female experience being simply extrapolated from male.) This idea was common throughout Europe in the early modern period, which was unfortunate for women who were raped, as pregnancy was widely viewed as proof that the woman had had an orgasm, signaling her enjoyment of the experience, which proved it wasn't rape. This supposed connection between female orgasm and procreation allowed the manuals to go into great detail about ways to heighten sexual pleasure, while still claiming moralistically to be guides for happy marital life.

The negative view of female sexuality portrayed in medical texts and sex manuals was enhanced by religious opinion. Orthodox Slavs in eastern Europe had the most negative opinion, seeing all sexuality as an evil inclination originating with the devil and not part of God's original creation; as in the rest of Europe, women were viewed as more sexual and the cause of men's original fall from grace. Even marital sex was regarded as a sin, with the best marriage an unconsummated one; this led to a large number of miraculous virgin births among Russian saints, and to the popular idea that Jesus was born out of Mary's ear, not polluting himself with passage through the birth canal.

Western Catholic opinion did not go this far, but displayed an ambivalent attitude toward sexuality. Sex was seen as polluting and defiling, with virginity regarded as the most desirable state; members of the clergy and religious orders were expected, at least in theory, to remain chaste. Their chastity and celibacy made them different from, and superior to, lay Christians who married. On the other hand, the body and its sexual urges could not be completely evil, because they were created by God;

² Baldasar Heseler, *Andreas Vesalius' First Public Anatomy at Bologna 1540: An Eyewitness Report*, ed. Ruben Eriksson (Uppsala, Almqvist and Wiksells, 1959), p. 181.

to claim otherwise was heresy. Writers vacillated between these two opinions or held both at once, and the laws that were developed in the Middle Ages regulating sexual behavior were based on both of them. In general, early modern Catholic doctrine held that sexual relations were acceptable as long as they were within marriage, not done on Sundays or other church holidays, done in a way that would allow procreation, and did not upset the proper sexual order, which meant the man had to be on top. (What has since been termed the "missionary position.") Spouses were held to enjoy a mutual right to sexual intercourse (the "marital debt"), which would even excuse intercourse when procreation was not possible; it was better, for example, for a pregnant or menstruating woman to allow her husband to have intercourse with her if refusing this would cause him to turn to a prostitute. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic authors adopted a more positive view of marital sex than their medieval predecessors, regarding sexual pleasure, even fantasies and variant positions, as acceptable as a prelude to procreative intercourse.

The Protestant reformers broke clearly with Catholicism in their view that marriage was a spiritually preferable state to celibacy, and saw the most important function of marital sex not as procreation, but as increasing spousal affection. Based on his own experience, Luther stressed the power of sexual feelings for both men and women, and thought women in particular needed intercourse in order to stay healthy. This approval of *marital* sexuality did not lead to a lessening of the notion that female sexuality in general was dangerous, however. Luther termed prostitutes "stinking, syphilitic, scabby, seedy and nasty" tools of the devil, sent to bewitch his students and other unmarried men, and in his mind prostitutes were not the only women with such power. He commented:

For girls, too, are aware of this evil [lust] and if they spend time in the company of young men, they turn the hearts of these young men in various directions to entice them to love, especially if the youths are outstanding because of their good looks and strength of body. Therefore it is often more difficult for the latter to withstand such enticements than to resist their own lusts.³

Western Christian authors and officials thus generally agreed that sexual relations were permissible as long as they were marital and "natural," though interpretations of the latter varied. Jewish authorities agreed, seeing procreation as a commandment of God, though marital sex still

made one ritually impure. Popular ideas about sexuality, and especially those of women, are more difficult to assess than official ones. Many historians have viewed traditional popular culture in Europe as unrestrained, celebrating at least male sexuality with bawdy stories, obscene songs, and, after the development of the printing press, a range of pornographic literature. They see the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a period when state and church officials attempted with some success to impose their ideas on the rest of the population and repress this freer sexual expression.

It is difficult to say whether this popular acceptance of sexuality ever fully included women, however. Many songs and stories that extol the exploits of male lovers are deeply misogynist, and express a fear of rampant female sexuality similar to that found in the writings of learned authors. Women who showed too much independence, sexual or otherwise, are generally punished in popular literature, and sometimes even killed. For example, a mid-sixteenth century German song titled "Song of how one should beat bad women" included the verses:

Now will I sing so gaily
Hit thy wife on the head
With cudgels smear her daily
And drink away her dress...
Her body be sure well pound
With a strong hazel rod;
Strike her head till it turns round,
And kick her in the gut.⁴

The women who are viewed positively in early modern popular literature are generally saintly virgins who guard their chastity at all costs, or sweethearts and wives who remain loyal to one man.

Since most of these works are anonymous, we can't say for certain whether any represent the views of lower-class women, but if they do, women had internalized the negative view of their own sexuality propounded by male authors. Written works known to be by women stem mostly from the middle- and upper-classes, and rarely include any discussion of sexual feelings.

Because using literature is so problematic, another way to approach female sexuality is to investigate those women who deviated from accepted norms of behavior. All early modern societies attempted to control sexual behavior through a variety of means, from secular and

³ *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 7: *Lectures on Genesis* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), p. 76.

⁴ "Ein Tagweyß/wie man die bösen weyber schlagen sol" quoted and translated in Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 121.

church courts to popular rituals designed to humiliate those perceived as deviant. Court records can give us an idea of at least what types of acts communities felt it most important to control. Because the consequences of sexual misconduct became visible within the bodies of women, they appeared more frequently than men in the courts that handled moral behavior, which confirmed people's notions that women were more sexual.

The vast majority of cases involving sexual conduct were for premarital intercourse, termed fornication. This has been best studied for England, where researchers in various counties have found that between one-fifth and one-third of brides were pregnant upon marriage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and up to one-half in the eighteenth. Much of this was because by the sixteenth century, the marriage ceremony involved several stages, a contract between the two parties agreeing to get married, and then, often much later, a formal ceremony in the church. Though officially the couple was not married until after the church ceremony, if they had agreed to marry or were regarded simply as seriously courting, sexual relations between them were not condemned in the popular mind and they might never be prosecuted for fornication. The same was also true in Norway, where 40 to 50 percent of first children were born within eight months of marriage, but it was not true in Scotland, where people never regarded sex as a normal part of courting. The contract was supposed to be somewhat formal, with witnesses and a clear understanding on the part of both parties about what they were doing, but breach-of-promise cases indicate that the two parties often had a very different understanding of what had been agreed upon.

It was often very difficult for unmarried women to avoid sexual contacts. Many of them worked as domestic servants, where their employers or employers' sons or male relatives could easily coerce them. They worked in close proximity to men (a large number of cases involved two servants in the same house) and were rarely supervised or chaperoned. Female servants were sent on errands alone or with men, or worked by themselves in fields far from other people; though notions of female honor might keep upper-class women secluded in their homes, in most parts of Europe there was little attempt to shield female servants or day-laborers from the risk of seduction or rape.

Once an unmarried woman suspected she was pregnant, she had several options. In some parts of Europe, if she was a minor her father could go to court and sue the man involved for "trespass and damages" to his property. The woman herself could go to her local court and attempt to prove there had been a promise of marriage in order to coerce the man

to marry her. This might also happen once her employer or acquaintances suspected pregnancy. Marriage was the favored official solution, and was agreed upon in a surprising number of cases, indicating that perhaps there had been an informal agreement, or at least that the man was now willing to take responsibility for his actions. In cases where marriage was impossible, such as those involving married men, the courts might order the man to maintain the child for a set period of years. This worked best in Scotland, where 65 percent of the men accused of fathering illegitimate children admitted to it, though this meant they might have to pay more than half their annual wages for several years to support the child.

The woman might also charge the man concerned with rape. Rape was a capital crime in many parts of Europe, but the actual sentences handed out were more likely to be fines and brief imprisonments, with the severity of sentence dependent on the social status of the victim and perpetrator. The victim had to prove that she had cried out and made attempts to repel the attacker, and had to bring the charge within a short period of time after the attack had happened. As noted above, her pregnancy might be used as disproof that a rape had occurred, but not all jurists accepted the notion that conception proved consent. Charges of rape were fairly rare, which suggests that it was underreported, but examinations of trial records indicate that rape charges were usually taken seriously, with judges and lawyers rarely suggesting the woman herself provoked the attack. Women bringing rape charges were often more interested in getting their own honorable reputations back than in punishing the perpetrator, and for this reason sometimes requested that the judge force their rapists to marry them. We may have difficulty understanding why any woman would do this, but it was often the easiest way for a woman who was no longer a virgin to establish an honorable social identity as a married woman.

Many women attempted to deny the pregnancy as long as possible. Early modern clothing styles, with full skirts and aprons, allowed most women to go until late in the pregnancy without showing clear visible signs. A woman might attempt to induce an abortion, either by physical means such as tying her waist very tight or carrying heavy objects, or by herbal concoctions which she brewed herself or purchased from a local person reputed to know about such things. Recipes for what we would term abortifacients were readily available in popular medical guides, cookbooks, and herbals, generally labeled as medicine which would bring on a late menstrual flow, or "provoke the monthlies." As we noted above, both doctors and everyday people regarded regular menstruation as essential to maintaining a woman's health, so anything that stopped

her periods was dangerous. Pregnancy was only one possible reason, and a woman could not be absolutely sure she was pregnant until she quickened, that is, felt the child move within her. This was the point at which the child was regarded as gaining a soul to become fully alive – that is what “quickening” originally meant – so that a woman taking medicine to start her period before quickening was generally not regarded as attempting an abortion. Whether any of these medicines would have been effective is another matter, however. Some of them did contain ingredients that do strengthen uterine contractions, such as ergot, rue, or savin, but these can also be poisonous in large doses. It was very difficult for women to know exactly what dosage they were taking, for the raw ingredients contain widely varying amounts of active ingredients and their strength depends on how one prepares them, so that it was very likely that a woman would take too little to have any effect or too much and become violently ill or die.

Penalties for attempting or performing an abortion after the child had quickened grew increasingly harsh during the early modern period. In the Holy Roman Empire, aborting a “living” child was made a capital offense in 1532, with death to be by decapitation for men and by drowning for women. Midwives were ordered “when they come upon a young girl or someone else who is pregnant outside of marriage, they should speak to them of their own accord and warn them with threats of punishment not to harm the fetus in any way or take any bad advice, as such foolish people are very likely to do.”⁵ Abortion was very difficult to detect, however, and most accusations of abortion emerged in trials for infanticide, in which a mother’s attempts to end her pregnancy before the birth became evidence of her intent. (Contraception was even harder to detect, and though religious and secular authorities all opposed it, there were almost no cases in which it was an issue.)

In most cases women resigned themselves to having the baby even if they could not get married, often leaving their normal place of residence to have it with friends or relatives, though it was illegal in many parts of Europe to harbor an unmarried pregnant woman. The consequences of unwed motherhood varied throughout Europe, with rural areas that suffered labor shortages being the most tolerant. In Scotland, for example, unmarried mothers had to do a public penance which could be very humiliating, but then they were officially regarded as “purged” of their sin, and apparently were able to gain employment even with their child.

⁵ Prussian court record from 1746, quoted in Ulrike Gleixner, “*Das Mensch*” und “*der Kerk*”: Die Konstruktion von Geschlecht in Unzuchtverfahren der Frühen Neuzeit (Frankfurt, Campus, 1994), p. 158. My translation.

In rural Norway, about one-quarter of the unwed mothers married men other than the father of their child one to six years after giving birth, and the others managed fairly well. Even in areas where the stigma attached to giving birth out of wedlock was strong, such as England, some women gave birth to two or three children without marrying, and Peter Laslett has discovered that certain families were particularly prone to unwed parenthood among both their female and male members.

For many unmarried women, however, pregnancy meant disaster. This was particularly the case for pregnancies in which the father was the woman’s married employer or was related by blood or marriage to her, for this was adultery or incest rather than simple fornication and could bring great shame on the household. Women in such situations were urged to lie about the father’s identity or were simply fired; they received no support from the wife of the father, whose honor and reputation were tightly bound to her husband’s. Even when the man was accused of rape, his wife would stoutly defend him, asserting, as one village woman did that “he always acted honorably during the 23 years that they have been married, so this person [the pregnant maid] must have seduced him into doing this.”⁶ A pregnant woman fired by her employer was often in a desperate situation, as many authorities prohibited people from hiring or taking in unmarried pregnant women, charging them with aiding in a sexual offense if they did.

Women in such a situation might decide to hide the birth. They gave birth in outhouses, cowstalls, hay mounds, and dung heaps, hoping that they would be able to avoid public notice, and took the infant to one of the new foundling homes which had opened during the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries in many cities, or killed it. Before the sixteenth century, church and secular courts heard very few cases of infanticide, as jurists recognized that physicians could not make an infallible distinction between a stillbirth, a newborn who had died of natural causes, and one who had been murdered. This leniency changed in the sixteenth century, when infanticide became legally equated with murder in most areas of Europe and so carried the death penalty, often specified as death by drowning. A French royal edict promulgated in 1556 carried this even further, requiring all unmarried women to make an official declaration of their pregnancy and decreeing the death penalty for any woman whose infant died before baptism after a concealed pregnancy or delivery, whether or not there was evidence of actual infanticide. A similar

⁶ 1578 Memmingen ordinance, quoted in Merry E. Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany* (New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1986) p. 62.

statute was passed in England in 1624 and in Scotland in 1690, and in various German states throughout the seventeenth century.

These stringent statutes were quite rigorously enforced. More women were executed for infanticide in early modern Europe than any other crime except witchcraft, and in some areas the percentage of accused who were executed was much higher than the percentage of accused witches; in Geneva, for example, 25 women out of 31 charged with infanticide during the period 1595–1712 were executed, as compared with 19 out of 122 charged with witchcraft. In Belgium women found guilty of infanticide were generally also accused of witchcraft – the reasoning being that only the devil could lead a mother to kill her child – and executed in gruesome ways, such as being impaled on a stake and then buried alive, or having the offending hand cut off before being drowned. In England the conviction rate went down after 1680 when women successfully argued that they had not intended to kill the child because they had prepared linen for it, or had killed it accidentally or through ignorance. Women were still executed for presumed infanticide in Scotland until 1776, however.

Midwives were enlisted to help enforce the statutes. They were to report all births, and attempt to find out the name of the father by asking the mother “during the pains of birth.” If an accused woman denied giving birth, midwives or a group of women from the village examined her to see if she had milk or showed other signs of recent delivery; in the case of foundlings, they might be asked to examine the breasts of all unmarried women in a parish for signs of childbirth. Though always justified with comments about a rising tide of infanticide, sometimes this surveillance of unmarried women bordered on the pornographic; an eighteenth-century German physician suggested, for example, that all unmarried women between the ages of 14 and 48 should be viewed monthly at a public bath to see if their bodies showed any signs of pregnancy. Midwives also examined the bodies of infants for signs that they had drawn breath. Courts were intent on gaining confessions, occasionally even bringing in the child’s corpse. Records from a 1549 trial in Nuremberg report: “And then the midwife said, ‘Oh, you innocent little child, if one of us here is guilty, give us a sign!’ and immediately the body raised its left arm and pointed at its mother.”⁷ The unfortunate mother was later executed by drowning.

Execution for infanticide was the most extreme result of premarital sexual activity for women, but women also suffered for much less serious actions. In many southern European cities, women charged with

fornication or even unseemly behavior such as flirting or physically demonstrative conduct might be locked up in institutions established by church or city authorities for repentant prostitutes and other “fallen women.” Such houses, often dedicated to Mary Magdalene, also began to admit women who were regarded as in danger of becoming prostitutes, generally poor women with no male relatives; the ordinances stated explicitly that the women admitted had to be pretty or at least acceptable looking, for ugly women did not have to worry about their honor. Many of these asylums were started by reforming bishops or leaders of religious orders, and some began to admit a variety of other types of women along with prostitutes, such as girls who had been raped, women whose husbands threatened them, attractive daughters of prostitutes, poor young widows, or young women regarded as in danger of losing their sexual honor. These various types of residents were supposed to be separated, and those still “honorable” taught a trade and given the opportunity to earn a dowry; in practice the residents were often housed together. Their founders of such asylums also supported the establishment of orphanages and foundling homes (termed *ospizi* in Italy), in which unwed mothers were required to leave their children (and in which they might be required to work as wet-nurses for other infants along with nursing their own). All of these institutions were attractive charities for those interested in moral reform, and were sometimes also supported by taxes on registered prostitutes and courtesans.

In such asylums, the women did not take vows and could leave to marry, but otherwise they were much like convents, with the women following a daily regimen of work and prayer. Some of them stressed penitence and moral reform while others were more purely punitive, closer to prisons than convents. The latter were seen as particularly appropriate for women who refused to change their ways; who – in the words of the reforming nun Madre Magdalena de San Gerónimo, “insult the honesty and virtue of the good ones with their corruption and evil” and as “wild beasts who leave their caves to look for prey” spread “family dishonor and scandal among all the people.” Madre Magdalena recommended the establishment of a special women’s prison to King Philip II of Spain in 1608 “where in particular the rebellious incorrigible ones will be punished.”⁸

⁷ Nuremberg State archives, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 71.

⁸ Madre Magdalena de San Gerónimo, *Razón, y forma...* (1608) translated and quoted in Mary Elizabeth Perry, “Magdalens and Jezebels in Counter-Reformation Spain,” in Anne J. Cruz and Mary Elizabeth Perry (eds.), *Culture and Control in Counter-Reformation Spain* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 135–6.

This mixture of punishment and penitence may be seen very clearly in the Parisian women's prison of the Salpêtrière. In 1658, Louis XIV ordered the imprisonment there of all women found guilty of prostitution, fornication, or adultery, with release only coming once the priests and sisters in charge determined the inmate was truly penitent and had changed her ways. Imprisoning women for sexual crimes marks the first time that prison was used as a punishment in Europe rather than simply as a place to hold people until their trial or before deportation. Such prisons later became the model for similar institutions for men and young people – often specifically called “reformatories” – in which the inmate's level of repentance determined to a great degree the length of incarceration. (This, of course, is still true for prisons and “reform schools” today.) Once men and boys as well as women and girls were locked up, however, sexual crimes were no longer the basis of the majority of incarcerations the way they were in the earliest women's prisons.

Premarital sexuality was also controlled through less formal means, such as the discussions among a woman's neighbors and acquaintances about her reputation and honor. Such discussions show up in court records when they led to charges of slander, in which, as we saw in the last chapter, the most serious accusation for a woman was to be termed a “whore,” and most sexual slander directed at men – terms like “cuck-old,” “whoremaster,” or “pimp” – actually involved the sexual activities of the women ostensibly under their control. Concern for their sexual honor combined with a clear recognition of the consequences of premarital pregnancy made women themselves the most effective controllers of their sexual conduct. Courts were only successful in imposing standards that most members of the community already accepted, as witnessed by their largely unsuccessful campaign against intercourse between engaged persons. Many women took a more pragmatic view of their honor than church and state authorities did, however, recognizing that it could often be redeemed for a price (such as a dowry) and thus had material as well as moral aspects.

So far I have been discussing women's heterosexual relations which were viewed as in some way deviant. What about homosexual relations? This is a topic that is only beginning to be studied, and many surveys of homosexuality focus exclusively or almost exclusively on men. In part this is a function of the sources, for there are many more references to male homosexuality in the prescriptive literature of the medieval and early modern periods than to female. Jewish tradition from Biblical times through the early modern period prohibited female homosexuality, but the punishment was much less than for male. The New Testament makes no clear mention of it, though medieval Christian

commentators including Augustine and Aquinas interpreted a vague reference in Paul's Letter to the Romans to refer to it. Guides to priests and monks about what penances to set for various sins specifically refer to female homosexuality, generally setting lower penances than for male, though higher if the women involved were nuns or used dildos. Among the Orthodox Slavs in Eastern Europe, female homosexuals were accused of praying to female spirits and charged with paganism as well as deviant sexual behavior; female homosexuality therefore carried with it an anti-Christian component which male homosexuality did not. In western Europe, some authors commented that witches engaged in female-female sex, though this was not a standard charge against women accused of witchcraft. In 1532, female homosexuality was explicitly listed as a capital crime in Germany, though two years later an English statute prohibiting same-sex sexual relations made no mention of women at all.

These somewhat contradictory attitudes toward female-female sex stemmed in large part from misunderstandings about female anatomy combined with male bias on the part of commentators and lawmakers. Though the more enlightened sex manuals such as *Aristotle's Masterpiece* mentioned the role of the clitoris in female orgasm, male authors could not imagine satisfying sex without penetration. For many of them, there was simply no sex without penetration, so that they regarded female homosexuality as a kind of masturbation. It is, in fact, classed with masturbation as a lesser sin by many clerical commentators, for whom only male-male sex, bestiality, and heterosexual anal intercourse are major sins. Scientific writers such as Ambroise Paré interested in biological anomalies began to report in the sixteenth century about women in other parts of the world, usually the Near East or Africa, with clitorises so enlarged they could penetrate, and included these women in their discussions of monsters and prodigies. (These reports may have been motivated by learning that women in these areas underwent clitorodectomies, which led European men to assume the women's clitorises must have been overly large.) European women charged with female-female sex began to be examined for signs of enlarged clitorises, and termed “tribades” or “fricatrices,” words of Greek and French origin which meant women who enjoyed rubbing.

Though there may have been some women whose clitorises were as large as those imagined in travel literature and anatomical texts, a more realistic way for women to effect penetration was to use a dildo or similar device. Women using dildos show up in early modern pornography in both text and illustrations, but pornography reflects fantasies (largely male, as were its authors in this period) rather than reality, so

we cannot use it as an indication of the frequency of the practice. Dildos also show up in a few actual cases of female-female sex, and their use was uniformly condemned as far worse than female-female sex without one. A woman using a dildo was, of course, taking the male role, and most authorities regarded such gender inversion as much more serious than female homoeroticism. (In the same way, many punishments for male homosexual activity were more severe for the man who took the passive role because he was perceived as letting himself become feminized.)

The lack of understanding regarding female-female sex was generally accompanied by a lack of concern on the part of most authorities. Actual trials or accusations of female-female sex which made it into the written records are extremely rare, particularly considering the all-female milieus in which many women lived, worked, and slept, and the late age of marriage and high percentage of women who never married in some parts of Europe. Though references to female-female sex do emerge in legal and literary sources, because it did not produce children who would need to be supported, authorities were generally less concerned than they were about heterosexual fornication, particularly if both women were young and of the same social class.

Of the small number of cases involving female-female sex which actually came to trial, most involved transvestite dress or women who had otherwise usurped male prerogatives, such as the abbess Benedetta Carlini in Italy who took on the persona of a male angel to engage in sexual relations with another nun. Many of the women who were discovered dressed in men's clothing were serving as soldiers and sailors, and reported that they dressed as men primarily to gain the greater opportunities and mobility available to men, rather than for sexual reasons. Catalina de Erauso, for example, fled as a teenager from the Spanish convent where she had lived since she was four, reworked her habit into a shirt and breeches, and took off for South America. She described her various adventures in her memoirs, and, at least in her own writings, drinking, gambling, and brawling were the most significant aspects of her male identity. A few cross-dressing women actually married other women, however, including Maria of Antwerp (1719–81) who was arrested twice for marrying a woman. In her trial, she described herself not as a woman who was sexually attracted to women, but as a man in a woman's body, indicating perhaps that, like those who arrested her, she had difficulty figuring out how to describe sexual love between two women. Maria of Antwerp was exiled, and in several other cases in which cross-dressing women married other women the judges recommended that the transvestite partner be executed. In all of these cases, the "wife,"



3 Anne Bonney as a pirate, a book illustration from *Historie der Engelsche zeeroovers*, 1725. Bonney was one of the women who chose to dress in men's clothing to live a more independent life, and became an almost mythic figure. Besides highly romanticized portrayals such as this, there were also songs and stories written about her life and adventures.

that is, the woman who remained in women's clothing, received a milder punishment, another indication that gender inversion was viewed as more threatening than female-female sex alone.

Maria of Antwerp had difficulty describing herself as a woman attracted to another woman, but other early modern women did not, though they generally expressed their emotions in sentimental and sensual, rather than explicitly sexual, terms. Recent studies of women's letters, poetry, diaries, and drama reveal passionate attachments and close friendships to other women, both among the female characters they create and between themselves and other actual individuals. Such "romantic friendships," as they came to be termed in the eighteenth century, were expressed physically through kissing and caressing, but did not necessarily include genital sex. This has led some analysts to deny that they were "lesbian" – a word that came into common usage only in the nineteenth century – but more recent scholarship has stressed that the notion of a "sexual identity" as heterosexual or homosexual is also more recent than the early modern period and a focus only on genital sexual acts misrepresents how women expressed erotic feelings in earlier centuries. Early modern female authors were familiar with the Platonic ideal of spiritual love and close friendship and with literary forms such as the elegy in which passion was expected, but this does not mean that their writings were simply a literary exercise accidentally addressed to another woman. Thus along with court records, literary references in works by women are providing increasing evidence about same-sex relationships and feelings, such as those expressed by Lady Mary Chudleigh in "To *Clorissa*" (1703):

O'let our Thoughts, our Interests be but one,
Our Grievs and Joys, be to each other known;
In all Concerns we'll have an equal share,
Enlarge each Pleasure, lessen ev'ry Care;
Thus, of a thousand Sweets possess,
We'll live in one another's Breast:
When present, talk the flying Hours away,
When absent, thus, our tender Thoughts convey:
And, when by the decrees of Fate
We're summoned to a higher State,
We'll meet again in the blest Realms of Light,
And in each other there eternally delight.⁹

⁹ Lady Mary Chudleigh, "To *Clorissa*," in Robert W. Uphaus and Gretchen M. Foster (eds.), *The "Other" Eighteenth Century: English Women of Letters 1660–1800* (East Lansing, Mich., Colleagues Press, 1991), p. 148.

Marriage

For the majority of women in early modern Europe, sexual desires and relations did not lead to charges of fornication, infanticide, or deviancy, or to romantic poetry, but were simply one part of the institution that most shaped their lives – marriage. Marital patterns and customs varied widely throughout Europe, but in all places and at all times the vast majority of women and men married at least once, and society was conceived of as a collection of households, with a marital couple, or a person who had once been half of a marital couple, as the core of most households.

Marital patterns varied according to region, social class, and to a lesser degree religious affiliation. The most dramatic difference was between the area of northwestern Europe, including the British Isles, Scandinavia, France, and Germany, and eastern and southern Europe. In northwestern Europe, historians have identified a marriage pattern unique in the world, with couples waiting until their mid- or late twenties to marry, long beyond the age of sexual maturity, and then immediately setting up an independent household. Husbands were likely to be only two or three years older than their wives at first marriage, and though households often contained servants, they rarely contained more than one family member who was not a part of the nuclear family. In most of the rest of the world, including southern and eastern Europe, marriage was between teenagers who lived with one set of parents for a long time, or between a man in his late twenties or thirties and a much younger woman, with households again containing several generations. The northwestern European marriage pattern resulted largely from the idea that couples should be economically independent before they married, so that both spouses spent long periods as servants or workers in other households saving money and learning skills, or waited until their own parents had died and the family property was distributed. (Why this idea developed only in northwestern Europe has not been fully explained.) This period of waiting was so long, and the economic requirements for marriage set so high, that many women did not marry until they were in their thirties, and a significant number never married at all.

The most unusual feature of this pattern was the late age of marriage for women. Women entered marriage as adults and took charge of running a household immediately. They were thus not as dependent on their husbands as were, for example, upper-class women in early modern Italian cities, where the average age of marriage for men was over thirty and for women fifteen. They were not under the authority of their moth-

ers-in-law the way women were in eastern European households where younger couples lived with the husbands' parents. Did this also mean that women had a greater say in who they married? This has been a hotly debated question lately, particularly for England, which provides the most sources in the form of family letters, diaries, and statistics regarding marriage. Miriam Slater and John Gillis have argued that kin networks and a woman's immediate family continued to play the major role. Slater's evidence comes largely from the upper classes, where she finds complicated marriage strategies to cement family alliances; Gillis's comes from the lower classes, where neighbors and public authorities also helped determine whether a couple would marry, the neighbors through pressuring courting couples and public authorities by simply prohibiting marriage between individuals regarded as too poor. Historians who have focused on the middle classes, such as Sara Heller Mendelson, Linda Pollock, and Alan Macfarlane, assert that though couples may have received advice or even threats, they were largely free to marry whom they wished.

In some ways this debate sets up a false dichotomy because both sides tend to focus on cases in which there was clear and recorded conflict between individuals and family or community. In the vast majority of marriages, the aims of the woman involved and her parents, kin, and community were the same; the best husband was the one who could provide security, honor, and status. Therefore even women who were the most free to choose their own husbands, such as widows or women whose parents had died, were motivated more by what we would regard as pragmatic concerns than romantic love. This is not to say that their choice was unemotional, but that the need for economic security, the desire for social prestige, and the hope for children were as important emotions as sexual passion. The love and attraction a woman felt for a man could be based on any combination of these.

The link, rather than conflict, between social and emotional compatibility was recognized explicitly by Jewish authorities. Jewish marriages in most parts of Europe continued to be arranged throughout the early modern period, and the spouses were both young. Authorities expected love to follow, however, and described the ideal marriage as one predestined in heaven. Judaism did allow divorce, which was then sometimes justified on the grounds that the spouses had obviously not been predestined for each other.

One of the key ideas of the Protestant Reformation was the denial of the value of celibacy and championing of married life as a spiritually preferable state. One might thus expect religion to have had a major effect on marriage patterns, but this is very difficult to document, in

large part because all the areas of Europe that became Protestant lie within northwestern Europe. There were a number of theoretical differences. Protestant marriage regulations stressed the importance of parental consent more than Catholic ones, and allowed the possibility of divorce with remarriage for adultery or impotence, and in some areas also for refusal to have sexual relations, deadly abuse, abandonment, or incurable diseases such as leprosy; Orthodox courts in eastern Europe allowed divorce for adultery or the taking of religious vows. The numbers of women who actually used the courts to escape an unpleasant marriage were very small, however, and apparently everywhere smaller than the number of couples who informally divorced by simply moving apart from one another. Women more often used the courts to attempt to form a marriage (i.e., in breach of promise cases, or to renew a marriage in which their spouse had deserted them), than to end one. The impossibility of divorce in Catholic areas was mitigated somewhat by the possibility of annulment and by institutions that took in abused or deserted wives; similar institutions were not found in Protestant areas.

Social class had a larger impact than religion on marital patterns. Throughout Europe, rural residents married earlier than urban ones, and were more likely to live in complex households of several generations or married brothers and their families living together. They also remarried faster and more often. Women from the upper classes married earlier than those from the lower, and the age difference between spouses was greater for upper-class women. Women who had migrated in search of employment married later than those who had remained at home, and married someone closer to their own age.

Along with significant differences, there were also similarities in marriage patterns throughout Europe. Somewhere around one-fifth of all marriages were remarriages for at least one of the partners, with widowers much more likely to remarry than widows and to remarry faster. The reasons for this differ according to social class; wealthy or comfortable widows may have seen no advantage in remarrying, for this would put them under the legal control of a man again, and poor widows, particularly elderly ones, found it very difficult to find marriage partners. Women of all classes were expected to bring a dowry to their marriage, which might consist of some clothing and household items (usually including the marriage bed and bedding) for poor women, or vast amounts of cash, goods, or property for wealthy ones; in eastern Europe the dowry might even include serfs or slaves. This dowry substituted in most parts of Europe for a daughter's share of the family inheritance, and increasingly did not include any land, which kept land within the patrilineal lineage. Laws regarding a woman's control of her dowry var-

ied throughout Europe, but in general a husband had the use, but not the ownership, of it during his wife's lifetime, though of course if he invested it unwisely this distinction did not make much difference. Women could sue their own husbands if they thought they were wasting their dowries, however, and courts in many areas sided with the women, taking control of the dowry out of the husbands' hands. This was clearly something done only as a last resort, however, as it meant a woman had to admit publicly her husband was a wastrel or spendthrift. During the late medieval period, women appear to have been able freely to bequeath their dowries to whomever they chose, but in many parts of Europe this right was restricted during the sixteenth century to prevent them from deeding property to persons other than the male heirs.

This increasing legal emphasis on the male lineage paralleled an increasing concern among male religious, literary, and political writers with the authority and role of the male head of household, as we have seen in Chapter 1. At the same time, Puritans and some other Protestant writers also stressed the wife's authority over children and servants and the importance of mutual affection between spouses. But what about actual marital relations? Did husbands and wives show more or less affection for one another than modern couples? Which injunction was followed more in practice, that of husbandly authority or that of mutual respect? Studies that address these questions have been undertaken for various parts of Europe for the last twenty years, but little consensus has developed. Lawrence Stone took a very negative stance, viewing the early modern family as patriarchal and authoritative and relations between spouses and parents and children as cold and unfeeling. Most work since then has modified this position, using a variety of sources. Michael MacDonald has discovered that many people turned to physicians in seventeenth-century England because of serious depression suffered at the loss of a spouse or child. He and other historians have used a variety of sources to discover that people, particularly women, expected a marriage to include affection and companionship and were very distressed when it did not. Examples of tyrannical husbands and of mutually caring relationships both abound, with the safest generalization that which also seems the most obvious – marriages appear to have been most egalitarian when husband and wife were near in age, of the same or relatively the same social class, when the woman had brought some property or cash to the marriage as her dowry, and when her birth family supported her in disputes with her husband.

Marriage not only brought a woman into a relationship with her husband, but also with her husband's family, and often a new neighborhood and community; it also transformed her relationship with her birth fam-

ily. Despite the increased emphasis on patrilineality, women in most parts of Europe continued to think of themselves as still belonging to their birth families, or as belonging to two families at once. Women's wills often bequeathed items and cash to their sisters or nieces, and provided for masses to be said for members of their birth as well as marital family; women sometimes chose to be buried with their birth families rather than their husbands.

Marriage was the clearest mark of social adulthood for both women and men; for men marriage often meant that they could now be part of the governing body of their village or town, a role from which unmarried men were excluded, and for women that they would have authority over dependent members of the household. Middle-class urban women also began during the early modern period to redefine what it meant to be a "housewife." In part this was a response to their exclusion from productive labor outside of the household, which we will discuss in the next chapter, and in part a response to the increased emphasis on the family and marriage, particularly in Protestant areas. In fact, it was the wives of Protestant pastors who were often the leaders in a town in the creation of this expanded domestic role. Medieval urban "housewives" had had very little time for purely domestic labor; cooking was simple, cleaning tasks were few, and many domestic tasks such as baking and laundry were hired out. This began to change in the sixteenth and even more in the seventeenth centuries, when foodstuffs were more likely to come into households in a less finished state and middle-class households contained more consumer goods that needed cleaning and care. Of necessity, the time spent by middle-class women on domestic tasks expanded, particularly as things which had been unavailable or unimportant in the Middle Ages – glass windows, a stone floor instead of a dirt one, several courses at dinner – became important signs of middle-class status. Now the ideal wife was not simply one who showed religious virtues such as piety and modesty, but also economic ones such as order, industriousness, and thrift. We are used to thinking about the early modern period as a time of growing prosperity among the middle classes; the fruits of that prosperity, what we would term the "bourgeois life-style," were determined and to a large degree created by middle-class married women.

But what about women who could not or chose not to get married? In eastern Europe, with a much earlier average age at first marriage, the number of women who never married was very small, and most of them were in convents. In southern Europe, wealthy or middle-class women who chose not to marry or whose parents could not raise a dowry large enough to obtain an appropriate husband also ended up in convents,

whose standards about austerity were often not very high so that the women lived the same comfortable life-style they would have on the outside. In 1552 in Florence, for example, there were 441 male friars and 2,786 nuns, out of a population of 59,000; the difference between the two numbers results not from women's great religious fervor, but from a staggering increase in the size of the dowry required for a middle- or upper-class woman to marry. Historians are currently debating the cause of this dowry inflation, and it was decried at the time by moralists who rightly saw it as preventing people from marrying. Families were unable to control it, however, and so placed their daughters in convents instead of trying to find husbands for them, because convent entrance fees were much lower than dowries.

Entrance fees for convents were too high for poor women, however, and, as noted above, special institutions were opened in Italian cities by the Catholic Church and municipal governments for young, attractive unmarried women to allow them to earn a dowry and thus perhaps a husband. Women whose marriage chances were seen as unlikely in any case were also often sent to convent-like religious institutions, where they did not take formal vows and worked at spinning or sewing to support themselves. Unmarried poor women also worked as domestic servants for their entire lives, living in the household of their employer and so under his control.

In the cities of northwestern Europe, the number of unmarried women had been significant since the Middle Ages, and did not decrease in the early modern period. Demographers estimate that between 10 to 15 percent of the northwestern European population never married in the early modern period, and that in some places in some eras this figure may have been as high as 25 percent, making this more important than late marriage as a check on population growth. Cities attracted unmarried women with the possibility of employment as domestic servants or in cloth production, a situation reflected in the gradual transformation of the word "spinster" during the seventeenth century from a label of occupation to one of marital status. The types of employment open to unmarried women or widows left without resources were generally poorly paid, which we can see from the fact that households headed by widows and unmarried women were always the poorest in any city; unattached women often had to live together in order to survive.

In the late Middle Ages, city governments worried about how to keep unmarried women and widows from needing public support, and in the sixteenth century, cities began to view women living independently as a moral, as well as an economic problem. They were "masterless," that is, not members of a male-headed household, at a time when greater stress

was being laid on the authority of the husband and father, and so were perceived as a possible threat to the social order. Laws were passed forbidding unmarried women to move into cities and ordering unmarried female servants who had left one domestic position to leave the city, should they refuse to take another one. In some cases grown, unmarried daughters were ordered to leave the household of their widowed mothers to find a position in a male-headed household if their mothers could not prove need for them at home. Suspicion of unmarried women was not completely new in the sixteenth century, for medieval religious groups such as the Beguines had also experienced it, but this was the first time actual laws had been enacted against secular unmarried women. Both Protestant and Catholic authorities increasingly viewed marriage as the "natural" vocation for women – for all women in Protestant areas and for most women in Catholic areas – so that women who did not marry were somehow "unnatural" and therefore suspect.

Women themselves sometimes internalized the stigma attached to never being married. This was particularly true for middle- and upper-class Protestant women, who in only a few parts of Europe had convents as an alternative. The funeral sermons of unmarried women, for which the women themselves often chose their own Biblical texts and wrote the biographical segment, explain that the deceased was not simply a person who had lost out in the marriage market, but one who had fulfilled her Christian duties in other ways than being a wife or mother, such as taking care of elderly parents or serving the needy. Middle-class unmarried women in England took part in philanthropy, and in the eighteenth century began to teach in schools that were slowly opening for poor children, a field they would come to dominate in the nineteenth century.

Not all women agreed that marriage was preferable, however. The opposite opinion was expressed most eloquently by Anna Bijns, a sixteenth-century Antwerp poet:

How good to be a woman, how much better to be a man!
 Maidens and wenches, remember the lesson you're about to hear
 Don't hurtle yourself into marriage far too soon.
 The saying goes: "Where's your spouse? Where's your honor?"
 But one who earns her board and clothes
 Shouldn't scurry to suffer a man's rod.
 So much for my advice, because I suspect –
 Nay, see it sadly proven day by day –
 'T happens all the time!
 However rich in goods a girl might be,
 Her marriage ring will shackle her for life.
 If however she stays single
 With purity and spotlessness foremost,

Then she is lord as well as lady. Fantastic, not?
 Though wedlock I do not decry:
 Unyoked is best! Happy the woman without a man.¹⁰

Pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood

Very shortly after marriage (and in many cases before marriage, as we have seen) most women in early modern Europe were pregnant. In all religious traditions, the procreation of children was viewed as one of the most important functions of marriage – or the most – and childless couples were viewed with pity. Childlessness hit women particularly hard, because despite the fact that many people regarded the man as the source of all the active forces in the creation of a child and the woman simply the vessel, childlessness was invariably seen as the woman's fault. This is one of the reasons that suggestions about how to promote fertility through diet, exercise, potions, and charms were extremely common in midwives' manuals and advice books for women. Childless men could test their fertility outside of marriage with little public condemnation (though not officially condoned, adultery if one's wife was barren was rarely punished), but childless wives did not have this opportunity.

Determining whether one was pregnant was not an easy matter, however. The cessation of menses opened up the possibility, but midwives' manuals and women's private medical guides cautioned women against regarding this as a clear sign, because it may also have been due to other medical conditions. Nausea, breast enlargement, and thickening around the middle also pointed toward pregnancy, but only at quickening – that is, when the mother could feel the child move within her body which usually happens during the fourth or fifth month – was the mother regarded as verifiably pregnant. Until the late eighteenth century on the Continent and the nineteenth century in England, quickening was also viewed as the point at which a child gained a soul, so that charges of abortion could not be brought against a woman who had not yet quickened. This legal definition affected the way that women thought about their own pregnancies, for they did not describe a miscarriage before quickening as the end of a pregnancy or the death of a child, but as the expulsion of blood curds or leathery stuff or wrong growths. Pregnancy was not a condition affirmed externally and visually the way it is today with home pregnancy tests and ultrasound screenings, but internally

¹⁰ Anna Bijns, "Unyoked is best! Happy the woman without a man," trans. Kristiaan P. G. Aercke, reprinted in Katharina M. Wilson (ed.), *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1987), p. 382.

and tactilely, with only the mother able to confirm that quickening had happened.

Once a woman suspected or knew she was pregnant, she received a great amount of advice. The sixteenth century saw the publication of the first midwives' manuals in most European languages, which contained advice for prenatal care for the mother as well as the handling of deliveries. These manuals were reprinted and pirated for centuries, and new ones published in the seventeenth century, but their advice for expectant mothers changed little. Much of what they advise is still recommended today: pregnant women should eat moderately of nourishing foods, including a good amount of protein, and avoid foods that make them nauseous or that are highly spiced; they should moderate their drinking and avoid strong liquors; they should get regular exercise but avoid strenuous lifting; they should wear low-heeled shoes and loosen their lacing or corsets. The advisability of sexual intercourse during pregnancy was debated, as was the practice of letting blood from pregnant women. Many of their suggestions have to do with the mental, rather than strictly physical well-being of the expectant mother, and stem from a strong belief in the power of the maternal imagination. Both learned and uneducated people in early modern Europe believed that what a woman saw or experienced during pregnancy could affect the child. The desire to drink red wine or eat strawberries might lead to children with red birthmarks; being frightened by a hare or longing to eat hare caused harelip; sudden frights might cause a miscarriage or deform the fetus in some way. Birth defects were regularly attributed to bad experiences during pregnancy, or to a woman's frequent contact with animals.

As the time of the birth approached, a woman began to make preparations. She decided which friends and neighbors she would invite to assist her, a matter taken very seriously; witchcraft accusations occasionally stemmed from the curses and anger of a neighbor who had not been invited. If she lived in a town where the services of professional midwives were available, the mother chose which midwife would direct the birth. If she lived in a rural area, she would generally contact a woman known to be experienced in handling childbirths, for midwives who had undergone some theoretical training in childbirth procedure were rare in the countryside. In rural areas where church approval was needed to practice midwifery, village women simply chose one of their number as the most experienced, and then gave her name to the church authorities.

Until the mid-seventeenth century, and until the twentieth in many parts of Europe for most women, childbirth was strictly a female affair. The husband was not present unless his wife was dying, and male med-



4 Albrecht Dürer, *The Birth of Mary*. Though ostensibly the depiction of the birth of Mary, in reality Dürer's engraving portrays a typical sixteenth-century birth scene, with a number of women bustling about, the baby being bathed and the tired midwife asleep by the bed.

ical practitioners took little interest in delivery. Male physicians were only called in if the child or mother or both were dead or dying, so their presence was dreaded.

This began to change in France in the mid-seventeenth century, where some male barber-surgeons began to advertise their services for childbirth as well, and the use of "man-midwives" came to be fashionable among the wealthy. At first the techniques of these men differed little from those of educated urban female midwives, for both read the same books and had the same concepts of anatomy and the birth process, but gradually the training of male midwives improved as they took part in dissections and anatomical classes, from which women were excluded.

Male midwifery spread to England, where sometime in the seventeenth century the forceps was invented by the Chamberlen brothers, who kept its design a family secret for nearly a century and then revealed it only to other male midwives. The forceps allows a midwife to grasp the head of a child who has become lodged in the birth passage and pull it out, a procedure that is not usually possible with the hands alone and had been accomplished earlier only on dead children with hooks stuck in their mouths or eyes. A higher level of training and more use of instruments made male midwives appear more scientific and "modern" to middle- and upper-class English and French women, though there was still a strong sense of the impropriety of male practitioners touching women in childbirth among rural residents and lower-class urban dwellers, who could not pay the fees demanded by male midwives in any case. Male midwives were not very common in the early modern period in Germany, and were not found at all in eastern and southern Europe, where female urban midwives were much more likely to be granted access to formal training in female anatomy and physiology than they were in France or England. In northern Italy in particular, midwifery schools were founded in the mid-eighteenth century to teach women anatomy, though most midwives continued to be educated through apprenticeship.

Once labor had begun, the women assisting transformed the room, or in small houses the bed, into a "lying-in chamber," according to local traditions of what was proper. In many parts of Europe, air was viewed as harmful to the mother, so doors and windows were shut and candles lit. Special objects felt to be efficacious in speeding delivery were brought in, such as amulets, relics of saints, or certain herbs. Special prayers were offered, prayers that were often the most resistant to change when the religious allegiance of an area changed. The women prepared broth or mulled wine (termed "caudle" in England) to nourish the

mother through the delivery, and arranged the swaddling clothes for the infant.

The actual techniques of delivery varied widely, even within the same town. Some midwives and mothers preferred to use a birthing stool, a special padded stool with handles which tipped the mother back slightly; other mothers lay in bed, kneeled, stood, or sat in another woman's lap. The level of intervention also varied from midwife to midwife. Some immediately began vaginal massage and tried to speed the birth along by making the mother change positions or pulling on the child as it emerged; such midwives also often pulled on the afterbirth to be sure it all emerged quickly, a technique that could be very dangerous as too vigorous pulling can cause the uterus to become detached from the abdomen or even emerge. Others might wait for days during a very difficult labor before attempting to interfere. The most skillful and best-trained midwives took a middle route, intervening only when they thought it necessary, which was usually a case of abnormal presentation. If the child was emerging feet or knees first (breech), it could usually be delivered, but if it emerged arm- or face-first it generally needed to be turned. Until the invention of the forceps, the best way to do this was to reach inside the uterus and grasp the feet, turning the child by the feet to effect a feet-first birth (this technique is termed podalic version). Midwives' manuals beginning in the sixteenth century recommend this, and records of births handled by professional midwives throughout the early modern period indicate they handled this technique successfully.

There is currently great debate about how to assess the level of skill of early modern midwives. They have been viewed on one hand as drunken bunglers and licensed torturers and on the other as representatives of traditional female culture in which birth was a natural process, successfully handled in all but a tiny proportion of cases and the cause for group celebration. Some researchers assert that the early modern period saw childbirth as pathological, routinely associated with illness and death, while others state that it was not medicalized until the eighteenth century. All of these views are probably true to some degree. Urban midwives were highly supervised and regulated beginning in German cities in the sixteenth century and slightly later elsewhere, were generally literate and had received both theoretical and practical training; their level of skill was highly regarded, as rural noblewomen called for them at every childbirth. Rural midwives did not until the eighteenth century have much opportunity for training, and are sharply criticized in the guides and diaries written by their urban colleagues. Childbirth was an event with many meanings, at once a source of joy and the cause of deep foreboding. Most women experienced multiple childbirths successfully, but

all knew of or had even watched someone die in childbed. Using English statistics, it has been estimated that the maternal mortality rate in the past was about 1 percent for each birth, which would make a lifetime risk of 5 to 7 percent. Women knew these risks, which is why they attempted to obtain the services of the midwife they regarded as the most skilled. The fact that they took such care is probably the best indication that the talent and competence of one's midwife could make a significant difference.

Though we have very few records from midwives themselves, those that exist can give us a glimpse of both their activities and their self-concept. Catharina Schrader (1656–1746) was a professional midwife in the Netherlands who kept notebooks of all of her cases between the years 1693 and 1745, more than 3,000 in all. When she was in her eighties, she decided to pull all of her most complicated cases into a single book, dedicating it to the women she had delivered. Her discussion of one difficult delivery reads:

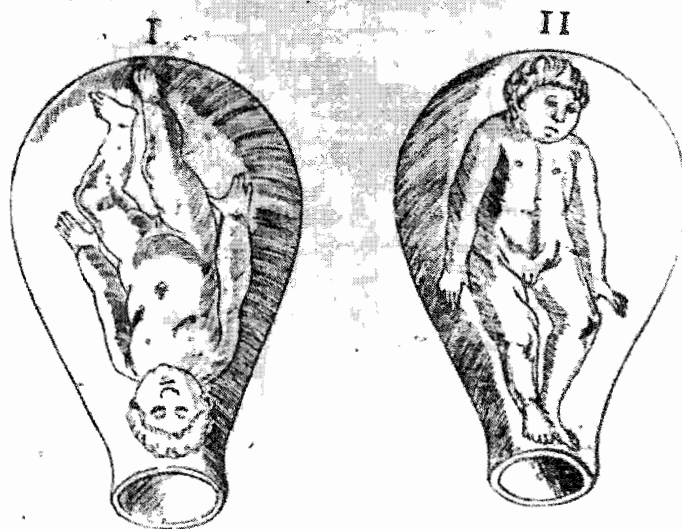
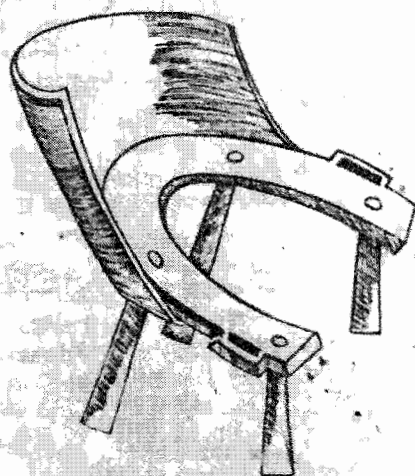
1711 on 10 February I was fetched to Nijkerk to Wattse Jennema, whose wife was called Al'tie Jowwkes. She wanted me to attend to her, but didn't call for me. And fetched a midwife from Morra, who tortured her for three days. She turned it over to the man-midwife, doctor Van der Berrg. He said, he must cut off the child's arms and legs. He took her [the mother] for dead. And he said, the child is already dead. Then I was fetched in secret. When I came there her husband and friends were weeping a great deal. I examined the case, suspected that I had a chance to deliver [her]. The woman was very worn out. I laid her in a warm bed, gave her a cup of caudle, also gave her something in it; sent the neighbors home, so that they would let her rest a bit. An hour after her strength awakened again somewhat. And I had the neighbors fetched again. And after I had positioned the woman in labour, [I] heard that the doctor came then to sit by my side. I pulled the child to the birth canal and in half of a quarter hour I got a living daughter. And I said to the doctor, here is your dead child, to his shame. He expected to earn a hundred guilders there [about 10–20 times what Schrader usually earned]. The friends and neighbors were very surprised. The mother and the child were in a very good state.¹¹

Midwives were responsible for the spiritual as well as the physical well-being of the children they delivered. In both Catholic and Protestant areas, they were allowed to perform emergency baptisms on children they thought might die, and midwifery ordinances contain careful instructions on how to do this properly. By the middle of the eighteenth century in Catholic areas they were also instructed to baptize a fetus that had miscarried and to perform a Caesarean section on any pregnant woman who

¹¹ Hilary Marland, *Mother and Child were Saved: the Memoirs (1693–1745) of the Frisian Midwife Catharina Schrader* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1987), pp. 62–4.

THE BIRTH FIGURES

THE WOMANS STOOLE
THE



had died in order to baptize the fetus within her. This intensification of concern with a midwife's spiritual duties among Catholics led in some areas to a decreasing concern with the physical care of mother and child; one study from a small city in Germany where Catholics and Protestants lived side-by-side has revealed that the postpartum death rate of Catholic mothers and infants (handled by Catholic midwives) was significantly higher than that of Protestants (handled by Protestant midwives) of the same social class during the period 1650–1800.

Mothers of all religions in Europe recognized that the dangers of childbirth might be intensified when children were born too close together, and attempted to space births through a variety of means. Many nursed their children until they were more than two years old, which acted as a contraceptive, for suckling encourages the release of the hormone prolactin, which promotes the production of milk and inhibits the function of the ovaries. They sought to abstain from sexual relations during the time of their monthly cycle regarded as most fertile, though this “rhythm method,” based on an incorrect view of the menstrual cycle, was even less effective than that practiced in the twentieth century. Judging by the frequency with which such practices were condemned, couples regularly attempted to restrict fertility through coitus interruptus, magical charms, and herbal potions; the first of these was the most effective. Condoms made from animal intestines or bladders were available to those who could afford them by the mid-sixteenth century, but they were originally designed to protect men from venereal disease carried by prostitutes and were only slowly seen as a possible means of fertility control for married couples. All of the methods that could be effective – abstinence, coitus interruptus, condoms – required the cooperation of the woman's husband, of course.

The experience of childbirth did not end with actual birth. In most parts of Europe, mothers were advised to undergo a period of “lying-in” after the birth, in which they sharply restricted their activities and contacts with the outside world. Although this was difficult for many rural and poor women, religious taboos which made a recently delivered mother impure meant that such restrictions were often followed

5 These illustrations from Thomas Raynalde, *The Byrth of Mankynde*, 1545, a popular English midwives' manual, depict a standard birthing stool, with handles at the sides for the mother to grasp, and early modern ideas of a baby *in utero*; they had originally appeared in a German midwives' manual, and were frequently reprinted in manuals in other languages throughout Europe.

even when they were economically disadvantageous. Early modern Russia had perhaps the strongest taboos, for Orthodoxy taught that everything associated with childbirth, including the midwife, attendants, place, and even the child was defiled. Not until her ritual of purification, which occurred forty days after birth, was anyone supposed to eat in the woman's company; baptism was often delayed until the same day so that the newborn remained impure and could nurse from its impure mother. Judaism and Catholicism had a similar ritual of purification, though contacts with the mother were not so sharply restricted. Her movements outside the home were, however, which meant a Catholic woman could not attend her child's baptism; in Italy the midwife who carried the child was the only woman normally present at a baptism. In some parts of Catholic Europe, this purification ceremony was seen as so important that it was performed over the coffin of a woman who had died in childbirth.

Protestants rejected the idea that women needed to be purified after giving birth, but Anglicans and some continental Protestants retained the ceremony, commonly called churching, terming it instead a service of thanksgiving. In some Lutheran areas, churching was required of all married mothers and forbidden to those who gave birth out of wedlock, another mark of the distinction between honorable and dishonorable women. Among Anglicans, unmarried women who had given birth were only to be churching if they named the father and wore a white sheet signifying their penitence during the service. Churching was violently opposed by English Puritan men in the seventeenth century as a Catholic holdover, but many Puritan women continued to demand it, as did English women well into the twentieth century even if they never attended other church services. We may view churching and similar ceremonies as stemming from clerical hostility toward the female body and childbirth, but there is evidence that early modern women rejected this interpretation and instead regarded churching as a necessary final act of closure to a period of childbirth. A woman attended her churching in the presence of the women who had been with her during the birth, including the midwife, and many of the rituals that were part of churching were of popular, rather than ecclesiastical, origin. Women objected when pastors sought to change the ritual in any way; one report from Abingdon in England in 1668 noted that "women refuse to be churching because they have not their right place, and midwives are excluded... from their women, who always used to sit together."¹² Churching is, in fact, only

one of many popular rituals and beliefs surrounding birth which did not die out in the eighteenth century. Evidence gathered in the mid-twentieth century indicates that people continued to regard a woman who had recently given birth as unlucky, and prohibited her from touching wells or stalls or visiting her neighbors.

The vast majority of women during the early modern period nursed their own children, often until they were more than two years old and on demand rather than on a set schedule. Women who could not produce their own milk and middle- and upper-class women in many parts of Europe relied on wet nurses, the very wealthy hiring the nurse to come into their own homes, and the rest sending the child to the home of the wet nurse, often for two or three years. Though by the eighteenth century this practice came to be viewed by moralists like Rousseau as a sign of the heartlessness and decadence of wealthy women, it actually stemmed from the fact that nursing was incompatible with many of their familial and social duties. Wealthy women were pressured to produce many heirs, and people seem to have been aware of the contraceptive effects of lactation; they were advised that nursing would ruin their physical attractiveness; they were taught that sexual intercourse would corrupt their milk and that their first duty was to their husbands. The decision to hire a wet nurse was often made not by the woman herself but by her husband, who made a contract with the wet nurse's husband for her services.

Wet nurses were chosen with great care, with those from rural areas who had borne many healthy children favored. Psychological and moral qualities were also taken into consideration, for it was thought that an infant gained these through the nurse's milk; after the Reformation, for example, parents inquired about the religious affiliation of any prospective nurse, for Catholic parents feared the corruption caused by Protestant milk, and vice versa. The wet nurse and her husband had to agree to refrain from sexual relations during the period of the contract, for it was thought that pregnancy tainted a woman's milk.

Along with the children of the wealthy, wet nurses also cared for the children of the poor; communities hired wet nurses to suckle foundlings and orphans, and by the eighteenth century working women in some parts of Europe hired wet nurses so that they could work longer hours without stopping. Many of these poor children died, as did many of the wealthy, some no doubt because of neglect or carelessness, but also because the wet nurses themselves were generally poor and took on more children than they had milk; in many cases these women had sent their own infant to an even poorer woman in order to take on children to nurse in the first place. These deaths led wet nurses to be called

¹² Quoted in David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, Oxford, 1997), p. 227.

"angel-killers" by eighteenth-century writers advocating maternal nursing, but it is difficult to document whether infant mortality rates were actually higher for the children in their care than they would have been otherwise; for orphans or foundlings, there was no other option anyway, and evidence clearly indicates that mortality among children put to nurse went up when dry nursing (feeding infants with flour gruel or pap sucked off a rag) was substituted for wet nursing.

Wet nurses often became very fond of the children they suckled, and were reluctant to return them to their parents, sometimes remaining with the children as servants or companions into adulthood. Some historians have speculated that children in early modern Europe also suffered emotional distress because of the wet-nursing system; frequent changes in wet nurses, the absence of their biological mother, and permanent separation from the wet nurse at weaning could prevent small children from forming good relationships with women. Because infant feelings affect later psychological development, wet nursing has been seen as contributing to negative ideas about women, particularly their fickleness and changeability. The irony of these possible consequences is the fact that, until the mid-eighteenth century, it was husbands who made the decision about how a child would be nursed. Only at that point did some middle- and upper-class women begin to assert their right to nurse their own children, and the rate of maternal nursing among these social groups increased.

Motherhood is, of course, an emotional and intellectual experience as well as a physical one, and, in sharp contrast to the theories of contemporary historians about parental coldness, early modern mothers generally became deeply attached to their children. Even those forced to abandon them for economic reasons could be torn apart by the decision, as this noted pinned to a foundling left in 1709 indicates:

This child was born the 11th of June 1708 of unhappy parents which is not able to provide for it; therefore I humbly beg of you gentlemen whose hands this unfortunate child shall fall into that you will take that care that will become a fellow creature and if God makes me able I will repay the charge and redeem the child with thanks to you for her care... pray believe that it is extreme necessity that makes me do this.¹³

The deaths or illnesses of their children often led women into depression or even suicidal despair, and those who showed no attachment to their children were viewed as mentally disturbed.

¹³ St. Martin in the Fields parish examination book, quoted in Valerie Fildes, "Maternal feelings re-assessed: child abandonment and neglect in London and Westminster, 1550-1800," in her *Women as Mothers in Pre-industrial England* (London, Routledge, 1990), p. 153 (spelling modernized).

Women's concern over their children became particularly acute during their own illnesses, leading a number of middle- and upper-class women to write advice books for their children in case they should die. Dorothy Leigh in *The Mother's Blessing* (London, 1616) commented that "motherly affection" led her to risk public censure by writing, and Elizabeth Grymeston opened *Miscelanea, Meditations, Memoratives* (London, 1604) with the comment:

My dearest son, there is nothing so strong as the force of love; there is no love so forcible as the love of an affectionate mother to her natural child: there is no mother can either more affectionately show her nature, or more naturally manifest her affection, than in advising her children out of her own experience, to eschew evil, and incline them to do that which is good.¹⁴

These books include much more advice about personal and family matters such as the choice of a spouse than do similar books written by men; a guide for her son written by Elisabeth, the widowed ruler of Braunschweig in Germany, includes long discussions of his role as a father as well as a ruler, a concern not found in similar "mirrors of princes" written by male rulers.

Widowhood and old age

Widowhood and old age are usually linked in the modern world, but they were not necessarily in early modern Europe, for women became widows at all ages, and might easily be widowed several times during their lives. The death of a spouse brought a more dramatic change in status for women than it did for men, for their link to the world of work was often through their husbands, so that his death affected their opportunities for making a living while the death of a wife did not. We can see this distinction in the fact that the word for "widower" in most European languages derives from the word for "widow," whereas the more common pattern is for the female designation to derive from the male – princess from prince, actress from actor. The word "widower," in fact, does not enter common usage until the eighteenth century, when people began to think about the loss of a spouse more as an emotional than an economic issue.

In many parts of the world women who became widowed returned to their birth families or entered the household of a brother or brother-in-law, but in most areas of Europe widows became heads of households

¹⁴ Elizabeth Grymeston, *Miscelanea, Meditations, Memoratives* (London, 1604), quoted in Betty Travitsky, *The Paradise of Women: Writings by Englishwomen of the Renaissance* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 52 (spelling modernized).

themselves and were forced to find some way to survive and to support their dependent children. Not surprisingly, widowhood generally brought a decline in a woman's economic status, with the poorest households in towns and villages those headed by elderly widows. During times of economic hardship, crime by widows, mostly petty theft, increased, though authorities tended to treat them less harshly than other malefactors.

Though widowhood often brought economic adversity, it also gave women a wider range of action throughout most of Europe. Widows who had inherited money or property from their husbands or who had received their dowry back at his death were usually quite free to invest it or dispose of it as they wished; records from rural England and Germany indicate that widows frequently engaged in moneylending. Aristocratic widows were often very active managing their families' business affairs, and identified the rights and privileges attached to their position as *theirs*, and not simply belonging to them in trust for their sons. The widows of some officeholders in France and Germany could inherit the office and the income that went with it, and artisans' widows could inherit their husbands' shops, though these inheritance rights were restricted beginning in the sixteenth century, as we will see in the next chapter. Widowhood could also place a woman in a position of great power over her children, deciding the amount of dowry for her daughters and assisting her sons in gaining positions of political influence.

Thus the fact that widows were not cared for within extended families was in some ways cruel, but it also meant that a greater share of the population was active economically through work or investing than in parts of the world where widows simply retreated into the household of a male family member. The prominence of widows was not new in early modern Europe, but had begun in the High Middle Ages, leading some historians to speculate that this was one of the factors in the dramatic expansion of the European economy which occurred at the same time. (The ability of an economy to grow is closely linked, along with other factors, to the size of the workforce; medieval and early modern widows' participation in economic life bolstered the European economy in the same way that the entrance of huge numbers of married women with children bolstered the U.S. economy in the 1970s and 1980s.)

Because nuclear households were the norm among most classes in most parts of Europe, there was really no alternative to allowing widows more economic and social independence than any other group of women, for they were the maintainers of a family unit. They were still very disturbing to notions of male authority, however, both because they were economically independent and because they were sexually experi-

enced women not under the tutelage of a man. Thus remarriage was often seen as the best solution to the problem of these women who were neither "married or to be married." Remarriage was also troubling, however, for this lessened a woman's allegiance to the family of her first husband and could have serious economic consequences for the children of her first marriage, and might also give a wealthy widow what was seen as an inappropriate amount of power over her spouse. Early modern laws regarding widows often reflect this ambivalence. In many parts of Europe laws made remarriage more attractive by requiring a widow to have a male guardian co-sign all financial transactions, even religious donations, and giving him power over her own children. The same law code might also make it less attractive by stipulating that a widow could lose all rights over her children through remarriage, including the right to see them. Not wishing to contemplate either the independence or remarriage of their wives, lawmakers were thus attempting somehow to keep a widow dependent on the family of her first husband.

In actual practice, whether a widow remarried or not was more determined by her economic and personal situation than by laws or theoretical concerns. Younger widows remarried much more readily than older ones, and widows with few children more readily than those with many. (The opposite is true in the case of widowers; those with many children were most likely to remarry, and to remarry quickly.) Widowers were far more likely to remarry than widows; French statistics from the seventeenth century indicate that 50 percent of widowers remarried, while only 20 percent of widows did so. For very poor widows or those with many children this low rate of remarriage stemmed from the fact that they were less attractive on the marriage market than single women, but for middle- and upper-class women it was often the result of their choice; the "lusty widow" who wants to remarry as quickly as possible is a common figure in early modern literature, but studies indicate that women who could afford to resisted all pressure to remarry and so retained their independence.

Widowhood was a clear legal status, but "old age" in the early modern period is harder to define. For women, the best marker might be menopause, which usually occurred somewhere in a woman's forties; the mean age at which women in northwestern Europe bore their last child was forty. Generally a woman's fertility lessened as she grew older, and attempts at contraception appear to have increased in England and France by the late seventeenth century among older couples. Because life expectancy was less than it was today, however, even if a woman stopped having children before forty she still had children in her household for most of her later years of life. Older women (and men) whose

children had all left home generally continued to live on their own as long as possible. Evidence from England indicates that middle-class children were more likely to assist their elderly parents by providing them with servants so that they could stay in their own households rather than taking them in; the elderly lived with their married children only among the poor. Though we often romanticize earlier periods as a time when the elderly were cherished for their wisdom and experience, this was not necessarily so. In many parts of Europe, parents made formal contracts with their children to assure themselves of a certain level of material support (e.g., "twelve bushels of rye and a place by the fire"), and public welfare rolls included many elderly whose children were still in the area but were not supporting them.

Older women were generally more in need of public support than older men, in part because their spouses were less likely or able to care for them than were the wives of older men, who were generally younger or had no way to leave an ailing spouse. Younger relatives were also more willing to take in elderly men than women; older women often formed joint households with other older female relatives or simply acquaintances to pool their resources and expenses, a practice almost unknown among men. The higher percentage of elderly female welfare recipients may have also been partly due to the fact that there were simply more older women than men around. Despite the dangers of childbirth, female life expectancy seems to have been gradually growing longer than male throughout the early modern period; by the eighteenth century in France, female life expectancy at birth was about thirty-four and male about thirty-one.

Aging brought physical as well as economic changes, and there is evidence that these were viewed as more of a problem for women than men already in the sixteenth century. Post-menopausal women were widely believed to experience increased sex drive, which might even lead them to seek demonic lovers in order to satisfy themselves. They were held to emit vapors from their mouths which could cause nursing women's milk to dry up or animals and children to sicken. They were thought to be especially concerned with the lessening of their physical attractiveness, for a Spanish physician's remedies to combat wrinkles were all directed to women.

Women themselves do not discuss wrinkles or sexual frustration, but complain about more serious types of age-related infirmities. Though she lived to be sixty-five, Allesandra Strozzi, a wealthy Florentine, described herself as old at forty-two because of her frequent pregnancies and many illnesses. Poorer women of course shared these problems, and added to them the effects of hard physical labor which often continued

through pregnancies and illnesses. Shakespeare has Jacques in *As You Like It* describe the seventh (and last) age of man as "second childishness and mere oblivion"; old women, often caring for both an even older spouse and children who were not yet grown, did not have the luxury of being able to lapse into such a state.

As we investigate the female life-cycle in early modern Europe, it may appear at first glance that little had changed since ancient times, and that, in fact, little has changed since. Hasn't women's experience always been more influenced by the condition of their bodies – menstruating, pregnant, lactating, menopausal – than men's? Haven't most women married and had children, with those who did neither or only one without the other regarded as somehow deviant? Haven't men always tried to control female sexuality and regarded the female body as inferior because it lacked a penis? The answer to all these questions is yes, which is why it remains extremely important in analyzing the history of women in any period to pay attention to the physical and social life-cycle. The new scholarship on men as men and on masculinity, which we will explore in the final chapter, has begun to take these issues into account as well, but this scholarship is – to use an appropriate metaphor – very much in its infancy.

Though many aspects of the female life-cycle appear to be true across time, our investigation has also demonstrated ways in which early modern women's experience differed dramatically from that of contemporary western women. Bodily processes – menstruation, sexual arousal, fertility cycles, pregnancy, menopause – are now regarded almost solely as physical matters, to be controlled and affected by hormones, drugs, and other medical treatments; to a large degree they have lost their religious or magical meaning. Through this medicalization, women have achieved greater control of these processes – they can now prevent conception or achieve it outside the womb, establish regular menstrual periods, and limit the discomfort of menopause – yet they have also lost connections with what these processes used to mean to women. Women have also achieved greater control of their social life-cycle; they can often choose to accept or reject men as sexual partners or husbands, choose how many children to have, choose to remain unmarried or widowed without sinking into poverty. This greater range of choice is threatening to many people, however, including many women, who long for what they perceive as the "traditional" female roles of the period we have been discussing and attempt to restrict contemporary women's choices through legislation or social pressure. One of the key elements in this view of women's traditional role is the idea that paid employment and

economic activities outside of the family were largely the province of men, an idea we will test in the next chapter.

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