

CONCEPTION THROUGH INFANCY IN
MEDIEVAL ENGLISH
HISTORICAL AND FOLKLORE SOURCES

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Childhood is one of the most crucial periods of human development and involves a unique combination of roles for both children and adults. The infant is fragile and entirely dependent upon the mother or a surrogate for her. Except in sickness, an individual is never so completely reliant upon others for such prolonged care and nurture. For the parents or those in a parental role there are great demands on time and a very long period when sustained altruistic behavior is required. While later developmental stages in a person's life are experienced as an individual, child-rearing is a group experience for the immediate participants. Because of the uniqueness of the familial interrelationships and the demands placed upon parents, we can expect to find a considerable body of folklore growing up around the process of child-rearing: tales and verses that aid the parents in childrearing and tell the sad fate of those who lapse in their responsibilities.

My concern in this and in other forays that I have made into folklore is to investigate the relationship between the lore and the historical reality. This is essential since vast areas of daily human experiences of medieval Europe's rural population have not been, or are only beginning to

be studied. There is, therefore, no familiar body of historical information available to which one can compare the folk literature. In comparing folk tradition to daily human experience I want, first, to discover how accurate the folkloristic literature is in portraying historical reality and, second, to learn the extent to which the lore can inform the historian on the attitudes toward family life that were current in the later middle ages. In addition, I would like to alert folklorists to the usefulness of certain historical sources.

The sources for the paper are both historical documents and popular literature. The historical sources are the records of coroners' inquests. The coroners of medieval England were charged by the crown to investigate all cases of violent death: homicides, suicides, and misadventures (accidental deaths). They examined the body and recorded the testimony of witnesses. When the coroners or their clerks were particularly diligent about writing up detailed inquests, these accounts became vignettes of daily life: they are short stories of lives which always end tragically. They tell us much about the daily activities of the rural population in England. They are a remarkably rich source on childrearing and children because they record the childhood accidents, the location of the parents and their activities at the time, and the presence of witnesses. The ages of children are given until they become twelve. At this age they entered legal adulthood.¹ I have already used this material on children's accidents for a piece on childrearing among the lower classes in late medieval England.² In my earlier article I could only hint at affective bonds between parents

and children. The literary sources in this paper provide further insights on this subject.

Because I am particularly interested in childrearing among the peasantry rather than the upper class, I have selected my sources with great care. The historical information on childrearing among the nobility indicates that it was substantially different from that among the peasantry. I have, therefore, avoided using romances unless there is ample evidence that the audiences were popular rather than limited to the nobility. Thus I have restricted my research in the area of romance to the Breton lays.³ Even the information in the lays must be used with a great deal of care because the subject matter is decidedly the nobility. While the rural audiences may have enjoyed the stories, they did not necessarily speak about the audience's own experiences in childrearing (or other subjects). I have also used lyric poetry and carols. Here the evidence for a popular background to the literature is better, though still a matter of debate.⁴

The ballads are another obvious source for information on medieval folk traditions and sentiments. Some of the ballads derive from themes and stories that appear in the romances.⁵ This overlap of aristocratic culture with folk narrative poems is not too surprising, for, as George Duby has shown, there was a great deal of cultural interchange between the high and low cultures in the Middle Ages.⁶ The ballads are not datable before the thirteenth century but most scholars regard the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as one of the great periods of ballad making. Thus, although the ballads that come down to us were usually not written down until the eighteenth

or nineteenth centuries and may be somewhat altered, used carefully they are representative of medieval folk culture.⁷

The final literary source that I have used is saints' lives, particularly those of the two English child saints, William of Norwich and Hugh of Lincoln. They represent an interesting sentimentalization of children. The **Miracles of Henry VI** are also a rich source for sentimental feeling for children.⁸

Conception is the first step toward childhood and the folk traditions of western Europe conform fairly closely to the scientific explanation of reproduction. J. A. Barnes, an anthropologist, has discussed the importance of this for the West. He points out that the mother-child relationship is biologically unambiguous regardless of culture and that there are innate and genetically determined responses in a woman to care for her child after she gives birth. Thus this relationship is "always recognized culturally and institutionalized socially."⁹ The evidence for the father-child relationship, physical fatherhood, is less apparent so that fatherhood is more often a social institution. But when coupled with monogamy, there is a basis for the possible development of ideas about physical fatherhood. At least since Aristotle the Western intellectual tradition connected the act of copulation with the production of babies. The folk traditions did as well. But it was not until the late nineteenth century that there was scientific evidence indicating the existence of eggs and sperm and the biological process of reproduction. Prior to these discoveries, Western European understanding of the biological significance of paternity was comparable to that of other cultures.¹⁰

The medical information on contraception available in Europe in the later Middle Ages gives no indication of an understanding of how conception took place during coitus. There were a variety of spermicides, talismans, suppositories, herbal potions to drink--one source recommends that women jump backwards seven to nine times after coitus to prevent conception.¹¹ Information of this kind was generally available in folk medicine as well. Indeed, the distinction between professional and folk medicine was almost non-existent in the Middle Ages. Surprisingly, the Child ballads do not contain any reference to contraception, although they are replete with stories of premarital pregnancy and all poetic sources indicate an awareness that coitus produced children.¹² Historical and literary sources both place a heavy emphasis on the loss of the maidenhead as a necessary result of coitus and a precondition to pregnancy. This is quite explicit in the rape scene in *Sir Degaré* when he "rafte hur of hyr maydyn hod" and told her that she was now pregnant.¹³ In manorial court rolls one finds loss of maidenhead was a finable offense called "leyrwyth."¹⁴

Premarital pregnancy was not necessarily considered immoral in medieval England. Romances, such as *Le Freine*,¹⁵ and ballads, such as *Gil Breton* and *Riddles Wisely Expounded*, rewarded premarital pregnancy with desirable marriages.¹⁶ There is increasing evidence that premarital sex and pregnancy were common in England. The evidence for the later period is very good,¹⁷ and increasingly for medieval Europe as well.¹⁸ Marriages were not considered to be valid until there was coitus and often the proof of this was children. Marriages could be formed legally by the consent of the

two parties and consummation of the marriage. No church service was necessary.¹⁹ It is possible that the English peasantry practiced the custom of not negotiating a marriage until there was proof that it would produce children. This was common elsewhere.

With the elementary knowledge and appropriate myths that procreation took a man, a woman, and the act of coitus, it is no wonder that one of the most common themes in all types of literature dwelt on the problem of Mary being the mother of Jesus but also a virgin. The verse form followed a fairly standard formula:

Mary Mother, well with thee!
 Mary Maiden, think on me!
 Mother and maid was never non,
 Together, Lady, but thou alone.²⁰

This dilemma even appears in **Robin Hood and Guy of Guisborne**: "Ah deere Lady! . . . Thou art both mother and may!"²¹

There were other problems with Mary and the Holy Family that appeared to perplex the song writers. All kinship systems that they knew were linear--either horizontal or vertical. The Holy Family appeared to have a circular kinship system:

Thou woman without peer,
 Didst thine own father bear
 Great wonder 'twas
 That one woman was mother
 To father and her brother--
 So never other was.

Thou my sister and mother--
 And thy son my brother--
 Who should then dread?
 Who has king for brother

And eke the queen for mother,
Well should be sped.²²

The question enlarges from how a maiden can be a mother to how she can be the mother of both the son and the father. The other kinship labels of sisters and brothers in Christ are also brought in to this confusion of circular kinship.

These worries were the stuff of heresy and had been a problem for the early Christian Church in the controversy over the Trinity. Were the three members separate entities, hence liable to be confused with pagan gods, or were they blended into one substance? The Nicene creed clarified this doctrine and reference to the doctrine was often made in the carols. The Christological heresies raised the problem of the divine or human nature of Christ and whether Mary was the mother of the man, Jesus, or of God. The Church had apparently not been successful in resolving these problems which ran contrary to observed fact about conception and kinship, but they at least conveyed the idea that these mysteries should not be questioned. One poem that discussed the contradictions concluded with the verse:

Wit Hath wonder and kind ne can.
How maiden is mother and God is man.
Leave thy asking and believe that wonder,
For might hath mastery and skill goeth under.²³

Mary and her kin were obvious exceptions to the normal process of conception and the normal taboos against incest.

Once the woman became pregnant there is very little about the problems of pregnancy or the development of the child in either historical or literary sources.

Abortion receives some mention. In *Tam Lin* and *Mary Hamilton*,²⁴ abortions were attempted with an herb or leaves from a tree growing in the church yard. Probably this would be a plant growing on the northside where the unbaptised were buried. The medical texts list a variety of herbal suppositories and potions that a woman might take to induce abortion.²⁵ Henry de Bracton in *The Laws and Customs of England* and later the author of *Fleta* are the first English legal writers to connect abortion with manslaughter and the methods they name are drinking potions or hitting or pressing a pregnant woman so as to kill the foetus.²⁶ Such abortion attempts did take place as a case in the coroners' rolls show.

On 12 Dec. 1503 Joan Wynspere of Basford, 'syngil-woman', being pregnant, at Basford drank divers poisoned and dangerous draughts to destroy the child in her womb, of which she immediately died. Thus she feloniously slew and poisoned herself as a suicide and also the child in her womb. . . . Thomas Lichefeld of Basford, clerk, then feloniously entertained her at Basford, knowing that she had committed this felony.²⁷

Successful abortions must have been rare and in the ballads they are never carried out or fail.

Childbirth was and is one of the major markers in life both for the mother and the baby so that there is a considerable amount of information about it in the poetry. Men were prohibited from being present at the birth as we can see in the *Leesome Brand* where the proespective mother orders her lover to go out hunting. Ideally, the birth was accomplished with the aid of a midwife and the eleven-

year-old girl in the **Leesome Brand** regrets that she has none.²⁸ The mother of Freine did have a midwife. It is true that until recent centuries in Western Europe and still in most cultures childbirth is exclusively a ritual for female participation. Midwives and other women were always present in the Middle Ages.²⁹

What is left out of most descriptions of childbirth in both historical and literary sources is the position of the woman when she gave birth. Later manuals on childbirth have the woman lying down or in difficult births using a special chair to put her in a semi-reclining position. Two of the ballads, **The Cruel Mother** and **Fair Janet**, suggest a more primitive method used for births in the woods when there was not an attendant midwife. In **The Cruel Mother** she went out to the woods and leaned with her back against a tree. In some versions she puts her foot to a tree or to a stone. In **Fair Janet** she directs her lover as follows:

"Ye'll do me up, and further up.
To the top of yon greenwood tree;
For every pain myself shal hae,
The same pain ye maun drie."³⁰

I think that Wimberly correctly identifies this with the custom of giving birth in a crouched or semi-standing position while grasping the limbs of a tree.³¹ It may well have been used in medieval England.

When a child was born, the midwife washed it with warm water or perhaps used oil, salt or rose petals to clean the baby and straighten its limbs.³² In the ballads the washing rituals is mentioned but it is sometimes done in

water and sometimes done in milk or wine.³³ The insistence on the necessity of a ritual washing may be an indication that the child was not considered truly human until the ceremony was performed.³⁴ Child comments that Tam Lin's request to be dipped in a stand of milk and then in a stand of water reflects a strong tradition for a process effecting change from non-human to human states.³⁵ The washing ceremony and its significance must represent an older tradition than the christening or baptism that also appears in the ballads. The appearance and importance of this ritual would be a fruitful area for future historical and folklore research.

That the washing of the infant in the ballads is always done at the father's direction raises some interesting questions about his role in deciding to keep the child. Did the father make the ultimate decision about the life and death of the newborn? In the **Nordic Dead-Child Tradition** Pentikäinen says that the fathers were the ones to decide if the baby would be put to its mother's breast or not. A child could not be abandoned if it had been suckled or if it had been named.³⁶ The Roman tradition also called for the baby to be laid on the earth before the father and it would be allowed to live if he picked it up.³⁷ When children are abandoned in the lays, it is also done immediately after birth. Thus in both **Sir Degaré** and **Le Freine** the mother abandons her child immediately.³⁸ These customs indicate that before the ritual of cleaning and naming the child is less than human and can be abandoned or killed.

Evidence on infanticide in late medieval England is rare. The secular law did not have a clear statement about the criminal status of such deaths. Sometimes the women who committed it were held culpable and sometimes they were not. There was not clear law until the seventeenth century.³⁹ Ecclesiastical law prohibited infanticide but very few prosecutions for it appear in the bishop's courts.⁴⁰ The coroner's rolls and other secular court rolls show very few cases. Out of a sample of about four thousand homicide cases that I have surveyed from gaol delivery rolls and coroners' rolls only two cases of the murder of newborn infants appeared. In one case Alice Grut and Alice Grym were indicted for drowning a three-year-old infant.⁴¹ Obviously, this child would have already been suckled. In the other case the jurors of Oxford said that a baby girl, one-half-day old, was carried downstream, and they knew nothing about the father or the mother. She still had the umbilical cord and the jurors apparently took this as a sign that she was not baptised.⁴² Even if one includes all of the accidental deaths reported where the victim is under one year old a pattern of infanticide does not emerge.⁴³ The explanation for this low incidence of infanticide is as yet elusive. It might be that it was so common that it was not reported. It might have been unnecessary when infant mortality was high and all able-bodied people were needed for work on the land. Or the taboo against it may have been particularly strong.

The classic ballad against infanticide is **The Cruel Mother**. Immediately after giving birth she stabbed her two children

with a knife. They come back to haunt her and cause her to lament for her dead twins.⁴⁴ Other than this ballad infanticide does not play a large role in popular literature. There are apparently no poems about it and in the romances the children are not abandoned without some provision for a surrogate parent near at hand. It is interesting that in both of the lays cited the children are left with members of the clergy, for this is what would have happened to many of the foundlings in medieval Europe.⁴⁵

Was birth deformity an excuse for infanticide or was it common for deformed children to be allowed to live? In his discussion of the Irish, Giraldus Cambrensis claims that they commonly practiced incest and pointed out that the consequence was a high degree of birth defects. He claimed that no other nation had so many children who were born blind, lame, or with some other defect. In instructions to the midwife she was to examine the child after birth to discover any marks or deformities.⁴⁶ In the Norse tradition such deformities would be adequate excuse for infanticide.⁴⁷ There is no evidence of this in England in either historical or literary sources. Even the little monster, Sir Gowther, is allowed to live although his viciousness is immediately apparent in his literally sucking the life out of nine nurses.⁴⁸ A child with major defects would certainly die very soon, for on the average 50 to 30 percent of the infants died in any case. It is also possible that the parents would not take as good care of such an infant and that it would eventually die from neglect or from an accident.

It is interesting to hypothesize that the folk preoccupation with changelings might have to do with birth defects. The problem is that there is no clear tradition in the ballads, the only sources surveyed, about the age when the elves steal the baby and put one of their own in its place. Sometimes it occurs when the child is a baby but in other instances the child is two or three or even older.⁴⁹ Since the changeling is not a deformed child, but a different and perhaps difficult child, I think the tradition must be associated with the "terrible twos," the period when children become more mobile and undergo emotional adjustments to their surroundings. It is a period when the children are still very dependent upon their parents for survival, and are extremely difficult to discipline and to keep out of trouble. The ages of two and three were the most dangerous for the children who appeared in the coroners' rolls: 48 percent of the accidental deaths occurred at this age. In the process of investigating their surroundings they drown, pour scalding liquids on themselves, get buried under walls and woodpiles.⁵⁰ The parents might well have ambivalent feelings about these toddlers and think that they were changelings.

It is interesting that this ambiguous attitude also comes out in the miracles of Henry VI.⁵¹ All of the children who are restored to life by their parents calling on Henry came to grief through their curiosity about their surroundings. As in the coroners' roll cases, the parents had just turned their backs for the moment when the accident occurred. The cases of miracles are remarkably close

to those of coroners' inquests in their form. The person who recorded the miracles must have had experience with the form in which evidence was given at inquests.

Once the decision was made that the child should live, it was nursed. While upper-class women such as Sir Gowther's mother might hire nurses of the knightly class, most women nursed their own children. The most important model for this act in the later Middle Ages was, of course, Mary. Statuary depicts her as nursing and so do the popular songs.

As she him took all in her lap.

He took that maiden by the pap,

And took thereof a right good nap. [grip]

And sucked his fill of that licour.⁵²

This is but one among many examples of the tender scenes between Mary and Jesus during nursing. In one Jesus thanks his mother for nursing him and general songs in praise of women show similar gratitude.⁵³ The moralistic writers pointed to this example to try to persuade the noble women to nurse their own children.⁵⁴

There is no information in the poems about how frequently or how long the babies were nursed, nor is there historical information, even in medical tracts. In one of the miracles of Henry VI a child of three is revived after being crushed and the mother immediately suckled it.⁵⁵ It is possible that a child would be nursed until the age of three. But it is also reasonable to suggest that this represents a strong folk belief about the curative powers of mother's milk. If a child needed medicine it was given to the mother and assumed that

the infant got the benefits through her milk.⁵⁶

The baby was swaddled and placed in a cradle. The custom of swaddling appears in ballads, lays, and carols. Again, the reader of the carols about Christ is asked to feel sorry for him because he had no swaddling clothes or cradle.

On a poor bed Thou liest here
That grieves me sor:
Thy cradle bare is as a bier

. . .

Jesu, sweet Son be not wrath
Though I have neither clout nor cloth
Round Thee to fold;
I have no clout Thee to next,
But lay Thy feet to my breast,⁵⁷
And keep They from the cold.

Some of the peasantry must have found it easy to identify with the plight of Jesus and his mother. In a very touching scene in the fields in **Song of the Husbandman** the children are taken to work with their parents.

And at the londes ende lay a litell crom-bolle,
And there on lay a littel childe lapped in cloutes,
And tweyne of tweie yeres olde opon a-nother syde,

They were all crying until their father sighed and asked them to be still.⁵⁸

Much of the child's early years were spent in the cradle. Learned opinion from books of advice advised that the child be left in the cradle until age three.⁵⁹ Children did spend a good bit of time there because a swaddled child in a cradle was not much trouble to take care of and could be left alone in the house. The most common accident for both male and female infants was

to be burnt in the cradle (50 percent of female infants and 46 percent of male). Since the infants were wrapped in linen, linsey-woolsey, or wool, the smell of burning cloth, if not the cry of the child, would call attention to the accident if an adult were in the house. In one case the child's entire legs were burned up to his penis. The extent of burns seems to indicate that infants were often left alone in the house, and a few cases mention this. In one inquest the jurors said that the father was in the fields and the mother had gone out to the well when the child was burned. In a London case of neglect Johanna, Daughter of Bernard de Irlaunde, a child of one month, was killed in her cradle by a sow bite. Her mother had left her alone in their shop with the door open and a sow wandered in and bit her head. The jurors go on to say that "at length" her mother returned to the shop and found her.⁶⁰ The anxiety about losing children in fires is expressed in one of the miracles of Henry VI. A mother was going out and leaving her son alone. She called on Henry to protect him and when she came back the house was in flames but the child came out unharmed.⁶²

The explanation for the cradle fires that repeatedly appeared in the coroners' rolls was that a chicken had wandered into the house and had picked up a burning coal from the hearth or a piece of burning straw, and dropped it on the straw-strewn floor. This could be correct. The fires were in the center of the room on a raised platform. There was straw on the floor for warmth and the child's cradle may also have had a straw pallet in it. Chickens wandered

freely in and out of the houses. I have searched in vain for some folk tradition that would particularly blame the chicken for such malicious acts. They are not a respected bird, but they are not regarded as vicious. Cradle deaths were no longer common by the third year of a child's life so that children must have been out of the cradle by then or spending considerably less time there.

The child was not confined in swaddling cloths and the cradle all of the first year of life. By the end of it children were up and mobile enough to get into trouble. They wandered around court yards and fell into wells, ponds, and ditches on their parents' property. For instance,

John, son of Reginald Reeve of Sturteslow, an infant one and a half years old, went outside Reginald's door while the latter was at dinner, and fell into a certain ditch and was drowned. Alice, his mother, searched for him, to wit, her infant, and found him drowned.⁶²

They also got into accidents in the house, the most common of which was pulling pots off trivets and scalding themselves. Falls and playing with knives also brought death. These accidents continued for two- and three-year olds, but even at this early age sex differentiation in the accident patterns began to appear. Girls were involved in accidents playing with pots or cauldrons (27 percent of their accidents at age two and three) while only 14 percent of the boys were. The girls were obviously imitating their mothers' work. In the accidents which occurred outside the home the little boys predominated. The boys apparently followed their fathers in their tasks outside the home.⁶³

The Miracles show the anxiety of the parents about the accidents and the fact that the children were not well supervised.

[Benedicta] had scarce yet reached her second year, so that she had clearly no strength whether of mind or body to help herself at all; and, while she was playing by herself within the doors of her father's house, her parents being elsewhere engaged, she fell upon a knife she had found and inflicted on herself a mortal wound. There was no one near. . . .⁶⁴

Again, note the similarity between the form of the coroners' inquest and the recording of the Miracles.

Highly mobile toddlers were trying to their parents but the medieval village children were not always neglected and left alone. The manuals of advice on childrearing suggest playing with the child, cleaning and bathing it, singing lullabies, and teaching it to talk ("lispings and repeating the same words").⁶⁵ The evidence from the popular literature shows that this was not only advice that nurses of the rich followed. In one of the poems of Mary's lament for her son she speaks of how lucky other mothers are.

Of all women that ever were born,
That bear children, abide, and see
How my son lieth me forore,
Upon my knee, ta'en from a tree.
Your children you dance upon your knee
With laughing, kissing and merry cheer.

. . .

O woman, woman well is with thee.
The child's cap thou putttest on,
Thou combest his hair, his colour see. . . .⁶⁶

Care of the children, therefore, was not just a burden on the parents, but also a source of enjoyment. Not only the mother's fulfillment with children but also the father's is expressed. Emaré's husband weeps when he sees children at play and mourns his own lost child.⁶⁷

Bess Lomax Hawes has written a very interesting piece about the content of American lullabies indicating that almost any song might be sung to children to put them to sleep, not just lullabies.⁶⁸ In the course of singing a baby to sleep no doubt medieval mothers sang carols, ballads, and maybe even drinking songs to their children. Thus the children would learn from birth about the rewarded and the punished behavior in the society through its songs.

The lullaby proper, according to the usual analysis, is supposed to be reassuring to the child, speaking of good things that will happen and protective people and surroundings.⁶⁹ The recorded lullabies from the late medieval England are far from this stereotype. The lullabies that Mary sings to Jesus are grim predictors of his eventual death on the cross.⁷⁰

Even the lullabies for children other than Jesus tell the child that it has come into an uncouth world. As the wretched child from Adam's line there is really little to hope for. The world is a vale of tears in which poor men become rich and rich men become poor.

Child, thou nart a pilgrim byt and uncouth gest

. . .

Child, if bitide that thous shalt thrive

and thee, [prosper]

Thenk thou was a-fostred upon thy modres knee;
 Evere have mynde in thyn herte of tho
 thynges three--
 Whan thou comest, whan thou art, and what shal
 come of thee.⁷¹

This type of lullaby speaks of a world that is not secure and loving, but that is fearful and transitory.

The picture the child is given from infancy is a realistic one. Infant mortality was very high. Life expectancy averaged about thirty-two years. And a child, a girl or a boy, could look forward to hard labor and severe disappointments. The anxieties expressed in the songs are not separation from parents,⁷² but the common worries the whole family faced. The child was immediately integrated into the vale of tears with the rest of the family, not isolated into a separate spatial and emotional realm as is the American child. The child became an immediate part of the common emotional and economic familial unit sharing their worries and concerns about the outside world.

From the mother's point of view such songs seem to have two functions. They do, as Hawes suggests of lullabies, express the mother's mixed feelings about childrearing and the time and trouble it takes. They also speak of the extreme sorrow and frustration of raising a child who will be carried off by disease or accident before maturity. And, finally, there is a very strong emphasis placed on the gratitude the child should feel for the mother that reared it. It forges a close mother-child bonding in very explicit terms. The relationship of Mary and Jesus was a powerful social ideal.

As the child matured and learned more about Christianity this bond was reconfirmed.

Familial closeness increased as the child got older. When the child had developed sufficient motor skills at the age of four, it went to the fields with the parents and accompanied them during their work. They learned their parent's work from a very young age. The accident pattern shows an extreme dropping off of accidents at age four because the children had more motor skills and because they were under more parental supervision.⁷³

It is, perhaps, too great a leap of conjecture to say that this early participation of the child in the family led to greater family harmony. But information that I have compiled on homicide patterns within the family suggests that the possibility should be explored further. Of the 553 cases of homicide recorded in fourteenth-century Northamptonshire only 8 percent involved intrafamilial homicide. This contrasts with about a third of the cases in America and half of the cases in modern Great Britain. The lines of conflict are also instructive. The husband-wife relationship accounted for 39 percent of intrafamilial homicides whereas parent-child relationships accounted for only 22 percent.⁷⁴ Mother-son and mother-daughter conflicts were rare. Further studies of the familial conflicts in the ballads might reveal more about how the family members fought, how they resolved differences, and what were the taboos in intrafamilial relationships.

The coroners' rolls give a number of instances where parents gave their own lives in order to save their children. For instance, an Oxford mother died attempting to rescue her twenty-week-old son.

On Friday last [n Aug. 1298] John Trivaler and Alice his wife were in a shop where they abode in the parish of St. Mary late at night, ready to go to bed, and the said Alice fixed a lighted candle on the wall by the straw which lay in the said shop so that the flame of the candle reached the straw before it was discovered and immediately the fire spread throughout the shop, so that the said John and Alice scarce escaped without, forgetting that they were leaving the child behind them. And immediately when the said Alice remembered that her son was in the fire within, she leapt back into the shop to seek him, and immediately when she entered she was overcome by the greatness of the fire and choked.⁷⁵

There are also cases where children are killed by accident and the sorrow and anger of the parents is recorded. For instance, a ten-year-old boy was shooting arrows at a dunghill when he missed and shot a five-year-old girl. He fled from the scene because he feared her father's anger.⁷⁶

We cannot leave the topic of parents and children without taking into consideration Philippe Ariès' thesis that during the Middle Ages there was no sentimental concept of family and children. While parents might love their children, they did not place a sentimental value on childhood. He pointed to pictures of children as small adults and made a series of erroneous assumptions about the medieval family. He assumed that people lived in extended kinship households and had stronger community ties than family ties, that children only became valuable at the age of seven when they could work in the fields, and, finally, that children were ignored in the early stages because of the high infant mortality.

Sentimentalization of childhood, he claims, only comes in the early modern period when families turn in upon themselves with the advent of industrialization and urbanization.⁷⁷

Medievalists have mustered their arguments against this thesis. McLaughlin has pointed out that by the end of the twelfth century there are stories about the delights of childhood and sentimental stories about children.⁷⁸ These traditions continue in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The literature abounds with laments of Christ to his mother⁷⁹ and those of Mary to women in general speaking about the strong sentiment for the mother-child relationship in general.

O woman, a chaplet thou chosen hast
Thy child for to wear to they great liking:
Thou fast'nest it on with great solace. . . .

O woman, thou takest they child by the hand ⁸⁰
And say, "Sweet son, give me a stroke". . . .

It is unlikely that the poets would make up this sentimental poetry about Mary and Jesus if it were not a common emotion and idealized response for the society at large.

There were also songs that idealized the innocence of childhood.⁸¹ And over half of the miracles of Henry VI involved raising children of all ages from the dead or curing them. These would not be so common if they had not appealed to people.

Perhaps the most striking testimony in the literature of the sentimentalization of childhood comes from the tales of martyred children. St. William of Norwich was supposedly crucified by the Jews in 1144. He was about eleven or twelve years old at the time. A cult immediately

grew up around him and made Norwich a great place of pilgrimage.⁸² There followed a rash of martyred young boys in many of the major cathedral towns. Toward the end of the trend, about a century after William, Lincoln got her boy martyr in St. Hugh,⁸³ who became one of the most famous of all thanks to Chaucer. This appears to have been one of the great hagiographical traditions that England exported to the continent, for, after William, martyred boys were found in many other parts of Europe as well, or at least saints' lives were made up for local versions.³⁴

The martyred child was a natural subject for sainthood. It had strong parallels to the lyric poetry about the child Jesus, it coincided with the popular biblical story of the Slaughter of the Innocents, and it fulfilled the words of Christ, "suffer little children to come unto me." The Middle Ages sentimentalized and venerated childhood in the way it knew best--it made saints out of children.

NOTES

¹ These records are very numerous. They are located in the Public Record Office in London under the classification of Just. 2. I have used a particularly good run of the records for Northamptonshire that covers the fourteenth and first years of the fifteenth centuries.

² I have done a historical article on the topic to which I will be referring: "Childrearing Among the Lower Classes of Late Medieval England," *Journal of Inter-*

disciplinary History 8 (1977):1-22. In this article I found that the accident pattern among children to age twelve very closely followed that on the Ericsonian model for the stages for child development. The types of accidents and the childrens' activities when they occurred fit well within his categories.

³ Thomas C. Rumble, **The Breton Lays in Middle English** (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), pp. vii, viii, xvii speaks about the audiences for these lays and their curious history. They probably began as rural stories and were made into romances for the aristocracy. They were then rendered into rough English again for the more popular audiences in England.

⁴ R. L. Greene, **The Early English Carols**, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. xxvi, xxix, xxvii, xxviii, cxviii, cxliii, cxxxi, clix and David C. Fowler, **A Literary History of the Popular Ballad** (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1968), p. 6. Both favor at least an initial popular origin.

⁵ M. J. C. Hodgart, **The Ballads** (New York: Hutchinson University Library, 1962), pp. 75-78. See for instance the lay "Sir Orfeo" and the romance "King Orfeo." Ballads, in spite of the name, were not meant to be danced, pp. 80-83.

⁶ Georges Duby, "The Diffusion of Cultural Patterns in Feudal Society," **Past and Present** 39 (1968):3-10.

⁷ Bertrand H. Bronson, **The Ballad as Song** (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 75-76.

⁸ Ronald Knox, trans., **The Miracles of King Henry VI** (Cambridge: The University Press, 1923).

⁹ J. A. Barnes, "Genetrix : Genitor :: Nature : Culture?" in **The Character of Kinship**, ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), p. 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹¹ John T. Noonan, Jr., **Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists**

(Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 202-203. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, **Montailou; The Promised Land of Error**, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: G. Braziller, 1978), p. 173, Pierre Clerge had a talisman or possibly a pessary for his mistress.

12 Rossell Hope Robiins, **Secular Lyrics of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 16-19: "Careless Love," "A Forsaken Maiden's Lament," "The Wily Clerk," "A Betrayed Maiden's Lament," "Sir John" show careless love causing unwanted pregnancy. An interesting example in in "A Little Sooth Sermon," in Margot R. Adamson, **A Treasury of Middle English Verse Selected and Rendered into Modern English** (London: J. M. Dent; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930), p. 6.

13 Rumble, **Breton Lays**, p. 48. A similar storyt in **Sir Gowther**, pp. 181-82.

14 "Leyrwyth" was a fine the lord could impose on villein women for premarital sex. Some historians, such as Zvi Razi, **Life, Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish** (Cambridge, 1980), have argued^d that these fines represent illegitimate births but this would be called "childwyth." The cases are frequent in almost all manorial court rolls.

15 Rumble, **Breton Lays**, pp. 92-94.

16 Child no. 1 and 5. [The earlier versions of **Riddles Wisely Expounded** may have been different: see Child, vol. V, notes.] There are a number of ballads in which pre-marital sex is not rewarded. These cases do not directly bear on the topic at hand but should be mentioned in passing. All unions involving incest or threat of incest end in suffering or death as in the lays, **Emaré**, and **Sir Degaré** where he is just saved from tragedy because he does not consummate the marriage. The ballads **Sheath and Knife** and **Brown Robyn** end tragically and even the suggestion by a wicked stepmother in **Lady Isabel** is enough to make the ballad end in death for her stepdaughter. There is another motif where premarital sex is not rewarded and this is akin to the old custom of bride stealing.

These end tragically with the girl coming near to being killed, or her brothers and father or her lover are killed fighting for her. There are a number of these such as **Earl Brand**.

¹⁷ Peter Laslett, **Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). This is but one of many studies on premarital pregnancy. It is particularly useful since it contains information on two early modern villages--Clayworth and Cogenhoe.

¹⁸ There is some discussion of this in Edward Brittain, **The Community of the Vill: A Study in the History of the Family and Village Life in Fourteenth-Century England** (Toronto, 1977), pp. 51-53. Other studies are also underway.

¹⁹ Michael M. Sheehan, "The Formation and Stability of Marriage in Fourteenth Century England: Evidence of an Ely Register," **Medieval Studies** 33 (1971): 228-63. Folklorists should be aware that bishop's court records are a very rich source for folklore material. See for instance R. H. Helmholz, **Marriage Litigation in Medieval England** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974). Many of the bishops' registers and monastic visitations have been published.

²⁰ Adamson, **Treasury**, p. 53. Frances M. M. Comper, **Spiritual Songs From English Mss.** (New York: MacMillan, 1936), pp. 4, 5, 12, and 17.

²¹ R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, eds. **Rymes of Robyn Hood** (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 144.

²² Adamson, **Treasury**, p., 40. See also Comper, **Spiritual Songs**, pp. 18 and 39. In the latter the poet puts into the mouth of Jesus the verse: "Shall I, Moder, maiden and wife, My dear spouse, shall I so?"

²³ Mary G. Segar, ed., **A Medieval Anthology: Being Lyrics and Other Short Poems Chiefly Religious** (London: Longmans, Green, 1915), p. 82.

²⁴ Child, no. 39 and 173.

²⁵ Noonan, **Contraception**, p. 210.

- 26 Ibid., pp. 216-17.
- 27 R. F. Hunnisett, trans., **Calendar of Nottinghamshire Coroners' Inquests, 1485-1558**, Thoronton Society Record Series 25 (1969), p. 8.
- 28 Child, no. 15A, verse, 21-24. She asks for a midwife but he replies that they are many miles from such aid and offers his services such as they are: "But if ye'll be content wi me, I'll do for you what man can dee." She replies, "When I endure my grief and pain, My companie ye maun refrain." David Rorie in a note to **Folk-Lore** 25 (1914):383-85 gives other examples of this taboo of men being present at childbirth.
- 29 David Hunt, **Parents and Children in History** (New York: Basic Books, 1972), pp. 80-85. It is a general practice among most cultures and was among Europeans (until doctors took over from midwives) for births to be the province of woman.
- 30 Child, 20 and 64.
- 31 L. C. Wimberly, **Folklore In English and Scottish Ballads** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928), p. 124 identifies it with an old Swedish custom and mentions the birth tree. The custom is more widely spread and has been identified with birth being an act of "falling." See Nicole Belmont, "Levana; or, How to Raise up Children," in **Family and Society**, ed. Robert Foster and Orest Ranum; trans., Elborg Foster and Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 11-12.
- 32 Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries," in **The History of Childhood**, ed. Lloyd deMause (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974), pp. 113-14.
- 33 Child, 5B and 54.
- 34 Child 1A, verse 20 and 41.
- 35 Child, I. p. 338.
- 36 Juha Pentikäinen, **The Nordic Dead-Child Tradition**,

Folklore Fellows Communications 201 (Helsinki, 1968), pp. 71-73, 75.

37 Belmont, "Levana," pp. 1-3. The custom of laying the child before the father was called "levana" or raising up of the child.

38 Rumble, **Breton Lays**, pp. 49-50, 86-88.

39 Naomi D. Hurnard, **The King's Pardon for Homicide before 1307** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 169. See also William S. Holdsworth, **A History of English Law** (Boston, 1924), IV, 501.

40 Richard H. Helmholtz, "Infanticide in the Province of Canterbury during the Fifteenth Century," **History of Childhood Quarterly** 2 (1975):384.

41 P. R. O. Just. 3|48 m. 4d.

42 H. E. Salter, **The Records of MEDieval Oxford** (Oxford: The Oxford Chronicle Company, 1912), p. 27.

43 Hanawalt, "Childrearing," pp. 9-10.

44 Child, 20.

45 Nunneries often took in abandoned children.

46 McLaughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates," pp. 114-15.

47 Pentikäinen, **Nordic Dead-Child**, pp. 78-79.

48 Rumble, **Breton Lays**, p. 183.

49 Child, 39. In one version Tam lin was a baby, in another he was three, in some a young man out hunting, and, finally, a boy of nine.

50 Hanawalt, "Childrearing," pp. 15-16.

51 **Miracles of Henry VI**, see for instance pp. 34-35, 51.

52 Comper, **Spiritual Songs**, p. 27.

53 Adamson, **Treasury**, p. 93. Christ praises his mother for nursing him, taking care of him as a child, for having him in her womb, and for kissing him. Segar, **Medieval Anthology**, pp. 109-110 for praise of a mother's care.

- 54 McLaughlin, p. 115. It was felt that only the mother's milk was best for the child. There was also an assumption that milk, like blood, was different for the aristocrats and the peasants. Thus wet nurses for the aristocrats had to come from that class. This is why Sir Gowther is nursed by nine knights' wives. Freine on the other hand was nursed by a porter's wife (Rumble, **Breton Lays**, p. 87). Emaré nursed her own child but she was put out in a boat with it. (Rumble, **Breton Lays**, p. 120).
- 55 **Miracles of Henry VI**, p. 54.
- 56 McLaughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates," p. 116.
- 57 Adamson, **Treasury**, p.84.
- 58 Beatrice White, "Poet and Peasant," in **The Reign of Richard II**, ed. F. R. H. Du Boulay and Caroline M. Barron (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1971), p. 70.
- 59 McLaughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates," p. 117.
- 60 P. R. O. Just. 2/255 m. 5. R. R. Sharpe, trans., **Calendar of Coroners' Rolls of the City of London, A.D. 1300-1378** (London: R. Clay, 1913), pp. 56-57.
- 61 **Miracles of Henry VI**, p. 74.
- 62 C. Gross, **Select Cases from the Coroners' Polls**, Selden Society 9 (London, 1895), p. 13.
- 63 For figures on childhood accidents see Hanawalt, "Childrearing," pp. 10-15.
- 64 **Miracles of Henry VI**, p. 63.
- 65 McLaughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates," p. 117.
- 66 Adamson, **Treasury**, pp. 152-53.
- 67 Rumble, **Breton Lays**, p. 125.
- 68 Bess Lomax Hawes, "Folksong and Function: Some Thoughts on the American Lullaby," **Journal of American Folklore** 87 (1974):140-42, 144.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

- 70 Robert D. Stevick, **One Hundred Middle English Lyrics** (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1964), pp. 66-67.
- 71 Ibid., 62-63.
- 72 Hawes, "Folksong and Function," pp. 146-47. In American lullabies either baby or the parents are going off somewhere.
- 73 Hanawalt, "Childrearing," pp. 17-18.
- 74 Hanawalt, **Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300-1348** (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 159-62.
- 75 H. E. Salter, **The Records of Medieval Oxford**, p. 7.
- 76 Hunnisett, **Bedfordshire Coroners' Rolls**, case 14.
- 77 Philippe Ariès, **Centuries of Childhood: A Social history of Family Life**, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Knopf, 1962).
- 78 Mc Laughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates," pp. 117-20.
- 79 Adamson, **Treasury**, p. 93.
- 80 Ibid., pp. 152-53, 119.
- 81 Green, **Carols**, no. 412.
- 82 William Holden Hutton, **The Lives and Legends of English Saints** (New York: Dutton, 1903), pp. 324-25.
- 83 Ibid., p. 327.
- 84 E. Cobham Brewer, **A Dictionary of Miracles: Imitative, Realistic, and Dogmatic** (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1884), pp. 171-75.