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GENDER, SEXUAL DISCOURSE, AND WOMEN'S PLEASURE IN LATER MEDIEVAL ENGLAND, C. 1300 - C. 1550

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SHORT ABSTRACT

This thesis brings multiple methodologies together to examine where we might find pleasure and sexual subjectivity for women in later medieval England. At once working to uncover the assumptions within historians' theoretical frames and lay new groundwork, in the Introduction I explore the semantic and theoretical challenges, and propose some new methods, focussing on pleasure as an operative term.

Chapter One sets up our current vision of how medieval people viewed women's sexuality. Theological, cultural, and civic sources are brought together to build a picture of the structures that enabled misogyny. I demonstrate the structures that silenced women and legitimated men's violence against them, as well as the ways in which ostensibly misogynistic sources might speak against themselves.

In Chapter Two, a queer philological approach uncovers signifiers for sex acts, as well as expressions of subjectivity, pleasure, and celebration. Scholars have either passed over or not known what, quite, to make of women described as sexually assertive, and where to situate them in the active/passive axis, let alone how to interpret these women beyond the usual idea of expressions of misogyny. In place of silence, we examine ways of naming sex: soft, joyful, and funny wordplay informed by the social worlds of labour and transaction described women's bodies and their gratification. In this way, a form of women's sexual subjectivity was enunciated.

Chapter Three takes the insight that singlewomen and their pleasure was present in literary source bases, and aims to reconstruct the webs of textual transmission in the extant manuscripts of 'Women's songs'. This leads us into different ways of thinking about composition, authors, copyists, performers, readers, and listeners.

In Chapter Four I examine the world of singlewomen, their work, and their sexuality as described in urban and ecclesiastical courts. I address the question of whether the acts, spaces, and

expectations expressed in 'Women's songs' are also reflected in social practice. I offer a social and cultural history in light of the sensibilities that I have explored in the preceding chapters.

I conclude with this study's implications for how we view discourses of sexuality when we approach sexuality via pleasure.

LONG ABSTRACT

This thesis brings multiple methodologies together to examine where we might find pleasure and sexual subjectivity for women in later medieval England. Close reading of didactic, regulatory, and literary texts, codicological evidence, and legal history are employed in turn to reveal different facets of a highly developed discursive environment. At once working to uncover the assumptions within historians' theoretical frames and lay new groundwork, the Introduction demonstrates the stakes for how we ask questions of the past. I explore the semantic and theoretical challenges, and propose some new methods, focussing on pleasure as an operative term.

Chapter One sets up our current vision of how medieval people viewed women's sexuality. Theological, cultural, and civic sources are brought together to build a picture of the structures that enabled misogyny. The first source group is a broad range of imaginative and didactic material that reflects views we might understand as 'normative': confessionals; canon law; literature; medicine; and natural philosophy. I show the structures that silenced women and legitimated men's violence against them. The critique then turns on scholars to lay bare how we ourselves participate in reproducing these structures. Having demonstrated how we can read more responsibly, I draw attention to a previously overlooked body of lyrics to show that medieval people were themselves ambivalent about the full implications of misogynist discourse.

In Chapter Two, a queer philological approach uncovers signifiers for sex acts, as well as expressions of subjectivity, pleasure, celebration, and the difference between being sexually active and sexually available. Ruth Mazo Karras argues that sexual acts were generally thought of in terms of one's actions towards another, something a subject 'does unto others'. A dichotomy is set between the active subject, and the passive object; and for Karras, while men might act as the subject or object, although more usually the former, a woman partner was necessarily always the object. Scholars have either passed over or not known what, quite, to make of women described as sexually assertive, and where to situate them in the active/passive axis, let alone how to interpret

these women beyond the usual idea of expressions of misogyny or of the fear and hatred of woman as temptress, a dangerous and unnatural subversion of the natural order of men on top. But while sex itself was associated with sin and transgression, women's sexuality was not just defined through passivity and transgression. In place of silence, we examine ways of naming sex: soft, joyful, funny wordplay informed by the social worlds of labour and transaction described women's bodies and their gratification. In this way, a form of women's sexual subjectivity was enunciated.

Chapter Three takes the insight that singlewomen and their pleasure was present in literary source bases, and aims to reconstruct the webs of textual transmission in the extant manuscripts of 'Women's songs'. This leads us into different ways of thinking about composition, authors, copyists, performers, readers, and listeners. Cumulatively I build a comprehensive picture of the broad significance of 'Women's songs' in shaping and giving expression to pleasure.

In Chapter Four I examine the world of singlewomen, their work, and their sexuality as described in urban and ecclesiastical courts. I address the question of whether the acts, spaces, and expectations expressed in 'Women's songs' are also reflected in social practice. I offer a social and cultural history in light of the sensibilities that I have explored in the preceding chapters. The premise is this: if we carry forward the insight that expression of women's sexual subjectivity was neither unthinkable nor necessarily to be damned, we might look with new eyes at court records.

I conclude with this study's implications for how we view discourses of sexuality when we approach sexuality via pleasure.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CLBL	*Calendar of Letter-Books Preserved among the Archives of the Corporation of the City of London at the Guildhall*, *Letter books G through L*, ed. R. R. Sharpe, (11 vols., London, 1899-1912).
CLRO	Corporation of London Record Office
CD	*Consistory Database: Testimony in the Late Medieval London Consistory Court*, ed. and trans. S. McSheffrey, http://consistory.cohds.ca/index.php (2022)
DIMEV	Digital Index of Middle English Verse, ed. L. R. Mooney et al, https://www.dimev.net/index.html.
DMF	*Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*, version 2020. ATILF - CNRS & Université de Lorraine, www.atilf.fr/dmf.
EEC	*Early English Carols*, ed. R. Greene (Oxford, 1935)
e-LALME	M. Benskin, M. Laing, V. Karaiskos, and K. Williamson, *An Electronic Version of A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme/elalme.html (Edinburgh, 2013).
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*, eds. R. E. Lewis, et al (Ann Arbor, 1952-2001), online edition in Middle English Compendium, eds. F. McSparran, et al., (Ann Arbor, 2000-2018), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary.
MELC	*Medieval English Lyrics and Carols*, ed. T. G. Duncan (Cambridge, 2013).

OED	*Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford, 2004).
TNA	The National Archives

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 204, fol. 21r 110

Figure 2: Leicester, Leicestershire Record Office 6D32, p. 38 169

Figure 3: London, British Library Egerton 3537, fol. 59r 194

Figure 4: Durham, Durham Cathedral Library MS V.ii.13, fol. 2r 206

INTRODUCTION: SEARCHING FOR PLEASURE

> Old Lacan takes up the slogan 'What does she want?' when he says, 'A woman cannot speak of her pleasure.' Most interesting! It's all there, a woman cannot, is unable, hasn't the power. Not to mention 'speaking': it's exactly this that she's forever deprived of. Unable to speak of pleasure = no pleasure, no desire: power, desire, speaking, pleasure, none of these is for woman.[1]

This thesis speaks of women's pleasure in later medieval England. I speak pleasure in its social constraints, where women who were vocal about sex and sexuality were vulnerable to censure and violence. I speak pleasure in literary culture, where sex acts centred around women outside of marriage found expression. I speak pleasure into communities of labour, households, and social spaces.

In a playful deconstruction of Lacan's 1972-3 lectures *On Feminine Sexuality*, Hélène Cixous unveils the stakes in assuming that women's sexuality is defined by lack – or even lack of lack, in Lacan's case.[2] When Lacan says women cannot name pleasure, this is related to a whole set of reductions and absences in theoretical treatments of women's sexuality.

It is not just in theory that women's sexuality has been silenced. In 1559, Realdo Columbo 'discovered' the clitoris. As the *Online Etymology Dictionary* so elegantly recognises, 'It had been known earlier to women'.[3] This presents us with an interesting and far more literal problem of absence: how do we talk about women's sexuality when *the lack* is language? What words can we use? The problem is not only a medieval one – as both Lacan and Cixous know. The sex education website *OMGYes* is dedicated in part to tackling the problematic relationship between pleasure and expression:

> One of the casualties of the taboo around women's pleasure is that there aren't words for the important ways touch can vary. There aren't specific words for the kinds of detailed

[1] H. Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', trans A. Kuhn, *Signs* 7:1 (1981), 41-55, at 45.
[2] J. Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, trans. B. Fink (New York, 1999).
[3] D. Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary* (2001), https://www.etymonline.com, accessed 15/07/19.

> techniques that matter so much. There are vague, clinical words like 'stimulate' and vague, pop-culture words like 'fingering' and 'rubbing'.[4]

Modern feminist theory and activism has reached the stage of discussing the ways in which the apparent structural silence of women's bodies, desires, and pleasures is constructed. But when we transport these insights to the Middle Ages, we are met with another silence. For Sara Ahmed, women 'deviate…from that which would give [their desire] visibility, substance, and articulation' in medieval textual worlds.[5] In other words, they are not men.

In *Medieval Obscenities* (2006), Nicola McDonald further found that limits within language are also partly to blame for the lack of scholarly focus on sexually explicit subject matter:

> Faced with a vulva on horseback, for instance, our ability to analyse its function and meaning is severely impeded by our real difficulty in finding an appropriate vocabulary with which to discuss it.[6]

In seeking to recover the discourses of women's pleasure in late medieval England, we are faced then with a range of semantic challenges. But in order to understand how and why these challenges have arisen, we need to set up the broad strains of modern thinking around medieval sexuality in general, and that of women specifically. This introduction first considers the most prominent narratives in the premodern history of 'pre-modern' sexuality, before delving into the approaches that inform these narratives, and how they have been taken up by historians and literary scholars. Lastly, I outline my own approach, sources, and argument.

WOMEN'S SEXUALITY AND HISTORY

Medievalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were largely reluctant to deal with sex, and so topics surrounding it – marriage, sex work, concubinage, courtship, and so on – were largely

[4] *OMGYes*, https://www.omgyes.com/en/about#/movement, accessed 15/07/19.
[5] S. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenonology* (Durham, N.C., 2006), 91.
[6] N. McDonald, 'Introduction', in *Medieval Obscenities* (Woodbridge, 2006), 1-16, at 9.

ignored.[7] But as early as 1927, Eileen Power was singularly attentive to the ways in which the basic expectations of medieval women's sexuality were represented in didactic and literary texts. Her findings sound familiar now: 'women found themselves perpetually oscillating between a pit and a pedestal', where they could aspire to a chaste ideal but as readily be disavowed as a temptress.[8] Power recognised the difficulty of living with the inherent contradiction of being equated with the Virgin Mary, or Eve: 'Janus-faced, [the Church] looked at woman out of every pulpit, every law book and every treatise, and she never knew which face was turned upon her'.[9] Far ahead of the curve in the study of medieval sexuality, Power gently introduced the ways in which sexual discourse contributed to women's subjection. Laymen did not have to read Jerome aloud nightly like the Wife of Bath's fifth husband to accept nonetheless the underlying 'possessive attitude' where women's value was located only in 'feminine honour'.[10]

However, from here, historians were slow to return to their focus on women, let alone women's sexuality. Where sexuality did figure in their accounts, it was portrayed as utterly repressed, or utterly negative.[11] This mirrors – or perhaps contributed to? – a wider trend, as the most prominent historical narrative is that sex underwent a significant change between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, apparently resulting in the making of 'modern' sexuality. Previous centuries, by comparison, are rendered in overview works as an amorphous pre-modern 'other'. In particular, it has been argued that the linkage of the concepts of sexuality and sexual

[7] Nineteenth-century editors of the texts discussed in this thesis are notable early exceptions, for which see Chapter Two, 89, albeit with a moralising perspective. Suffice it to say here that this work too was from a perspective of viewing medieval people (and by extension Catholicism, in a northern European Protestant context) as being less than morally sound.
[8] E. Power, 'The Position of Women', in *The Legacy of the Middle Ages*, eds. G. C. Crump and E. F. Jacob (Oxford, 1927), 401-33, at 401-2.
[9] Ibid., 402-3.
[10] Ibid., 403-4; at 403 she references the partially woman-voiced song 'The Nutbrown Maid', for which see below, Chapter Three, 203.
[11] M. Fries, '"Feminae populi": Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature', *Journal of Popular Culture* 14:1 (1980), 79-86, at 83-5; N. J. Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux* (Lew York and London, 1993), 60-77; A. J. Weisl, '"Quiting" Eve: Violence Against Women in the *Canterbury Tales*', in *Violence Against Women in Medieval Texts*, ed. Anna Roberts (Gainesville, Fl., 1998), 115–36.

identity is an entirely 'modern phenomenon'.[12] This is not the only step-change narrative: Thomas Lacqueur famously argued for a shift from a one-sex model of the body to a two-sex model in the early modern period.[13]

For Michel Foucault, the eighteenth century marked the end of a 'golden age' of sexual and gender identity freedom, where 'direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions abounded'.[14] A lack of scrutiny and intellectual discipline, he argues, allowed a kind of freedom around sex, whereas the invention of 'sexuality' constrained it. Historians writing from the 1980s onward have understandably sought to correct this, arguing that there was a premodern 'sexuality', in the sense of conceptualisation of sex. Using a variety of approaches, medievalists have illuminated how individual writers conceived of sexuality, as well as how medieval people interacted with and created social structures around sex. One method employed by scholars is to take a particular discourse or set of attitudes or practices, but apply it to a broad sweep of time and space. John Boswell (1980) sought to understand (predominantly male, European) homoerotic behaviours across the Middle Ages.[15] James Brundage (1987) limited his study to a single discourse, canon law, but from antiquity to the sixteenth century.[16] Elisabeth van Houts (2019) took a similarly long view in regard to marriage.[17]

Alternatively, historians can place emphasis on how sexual desires might have been understood in a particular time and place, but across genres. John W. Baldwin (1994) focused on

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[12] V. Mottier, *Sexuality: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2008), 1; see also E. Shorter, *Written in the Flesh: A History of Desire* (Toronto, 2005), and F. Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (Oxford, 2012) for similar perspectives.

[13] T. Lacqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992). For critique of Lacqueur see K. Harvey, 'The Substance of Sexual Difference: Change and Persistence in Representations of the Body in Eighteenth-Century England', *Gender and History* 14:2 (2002), 202-223.

[14] M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. R. Hurley (3 vols., New York, 1988-1990); idem, *Histoire de la Sexualité Vol. IV, Les Aveux de la Chair* (Paris, 2018), i, 3.

[15] J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, 1980).

[16] J. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago, 1987).

[17] E. van Houts, *Married Life in the Middle Ages, 900-1300* (Oxford, 2019).

three decades in Northern France, but across five Latin or vernacular genres.[18] Neil Cartlidge (1997) placed literary traditions from France and England in conversation to examine the nature of marriage, and how far we can argue that ideals were policed or pursued.[19] Building on this, Rüdinger Schnell (2002) argued for the importance of considering fictional texts alongside the prescriptive literature of the medieval church and state in order to understand ecclesiastical and lay anxieties.[20]

Alongside these overviews of places and discourses, feminist historiography sought to uncover the experiences of women living within structures that exerted control over every aspect of their lives, but in particular emphasising the precarity, misogyny, and expectation of passivity that dominated their sexuality.[21] Joan Ferrante (1988) was among the earliest to argue that not all women necessarily accepted this passive role. Taking examples from romance literature, Ferrante demonstrated that, denied an active or public role, chaste heroines and dangerous seductresses alike might act in secretive and sexually dangerous ways to affect a certain outcome. Further, she argued that writers and readers, regardless of gender, may have recognised the implicit social critique within these narratives: if women had been allowed to operate openly, such underhand means would not have been necessary.[22]

From this point onward, work on women's sexuality has largely splintered into – or figured as an element of – examinations of different stages in women's life cycle or sexual status: virginity, either as a young woman, never-married, or in holy orders; sexually active married life, women

[18] J. Baldwin, *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France around 1200* (Chicago, 1994).
[19] N. Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300* (Cambridge, 1997).
[20] R. Schnell, *Sexualität und Emotionalität in der vormoden Ehe* (Cologne, 2002).
[21] M. Fries, 'The "Other" Voice: Woman's Song, its Satire, and its Transcendence in Late Medieval British Literature', in *Vox Feminae: Studies in medieval woman's song*, ed. J. F. Plummer (Kalamazoo, 1981), 155-178; D. Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360-1430* (London, 1988), 90-93.
[22] J. Ferrante, 'Public Postures and Private Manoeuvres: Roles Medieval Women Play', in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds. M. Erler and M. Kowaleski (Athens, Ga., 1988), 213-229, at 227-8.

who have sex with women, or sex work; and widowhood.[23] In each of these areas, historians have carefully tracked women's interactions with legal, ecclesiastical, and social norms, how women are represented in literature, how they learned the bounds of sexual conduct – and whether women (or their literary representation) accepted or transgressed these norms. In many ways, however, the existing historiography does little to disrupt the narrative that medieval people had little to no conceptual awareness of women beyond the virgin/whore complex. In 2003, Kim Phillips called female sexualities that lay between virgin and whore 'the realm of the intriguing or titillating' which consisted of sexualities 'forbidden in practice, but not absolutely unthinkable in fantasy or humour'.[24] The trouble is, surely many women fell into this in-between. How could the reality for these women be forbidden?

An important step-change in the study of medieval sexualities was Ruth Karras' influential contribution *Sexuality in Medieval Europe* (2005; now in its fourth edition), which instigated no less than a paradigm shift in how historians understand medieval people to have conceptualised sex.[25] As we are concerned here with expression of sexual pleasure and subjectivity, we need to set out Karras' argument in order to explain our own point of departure. Karras drew on multiple discourses to make the important point that medieval culture developed sexual identities, but these existed along different axes to our own. She also resisted the homogenization of medieval sexuality, insisting that medieval attitudes were as varied and complicated, and often as conflicting, as those of today. Karras does however consider there to be two helpful distinctions in understanding medieval approaches to sexuality. First, she asserts that we cannot speak of 'homosexuality' or

[23] These studies are too numerous to list comprehensively here, but some particularly significant contributions include: P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c.1300-1520* (Oxford, 1992); D. Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, 1993); *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250-1800*, eds. J. Bennett and A. M. Froide (Philadelphia, 1999); K. M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270-1540* (Manchester, 2003); J. Bennett, 'Writing Fornication: Medieval Leyrwite and its Historians', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 13 (2003), 131-162; S. McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia, 2006).

[24] Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 146.

[25] R. M. Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (London, 2005, 4th edn 2023), 4-5.

'heterosexuality' in medieval Europe.[26] Rather, it is more useful to look at differences in attitude towards reproductive and non-reproductive sex. This approach helps us to see sexualities in the middle range.

Secondly, and more problematically for this thesis, Karras argues that sexual acts were generally thought of in terms of one's actions towards another, something a subject 'does unto others'. A dichotomy is set between the active subject, and the passive object; and for Karras, while men might act as the penetrating subject or penetrated object, although more usually the former, a woman partner was necessarily always the object.[27] Women who demonstrated sexual assertiveness were transgressive, but were not seriously considered as a challenge to the supposed primacy of this active/passive axis.[28] In the context of courtly love service, where women might appear to have the upper hand, Karras finds that a man who submits to a woman is not really submitting at all: it is 'so obvious a role inversion that its effect is a flourish'.[29] Other scholars follow this line of reasoning: James Schultz similarly concludes that courtly love is a stylised male behaviour 'accomplished by men for men'.[30] If this vision seems most appropriately applied to literary stock figures of upper class women, Kim Phillips nonetheless finds that 'we cannot really know how maidens below the elite explored alternatives to prescribed norms…we will never know about them', as 'sexuality was defined phallocentrically'.[31] For Patricia Simons and Katherine French, both building upon the insights of Natalie Zemon Davis, sexual or romantic role reversal is best viewed in the context of carnival or holy days; a line of argument recently and effectively adopted by Noah D. Guynn (2020) to analyse depictions of women who actively seek sex in early

[26] Ibid., 8-10.
[27] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 5-6.
[28] For a recent restatement and complication of this model with regards to gendered bodies, see L. DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York, 2021), 107.
[29] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 190.
[30] J. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago, 2006), 164.
[31] Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 168.

French farce.[32] Any alternative representation of women as active subjects thus comes to be regarded as a work of licensed inversion – carnivalesque, even – ultimately intended to reinforce normative (passive) behaviour for women.[33]

It is not that Karras is wrong about some of the dominant strands for how medieval sexuality was conceptualised. However, from the impact on the field, we can see some of the implications for the direction of interpretation when historians start with or depart from the assumption that women were passive. While Karras herself discusses extensively women's ability to initiate and enjoy sex, especially within the context of marriage, this paradigm renders efforts to focus on women's sexual agency and pleasure as *methodologically* aberrant.[34] For Karras, at the point where sex is happening, 'women's consent gets lost because they are always perceived as passive'.[35]

Analysis of same-sex sexuality, in particular instances of women who had sex with women, also has the potential to complicate the active/passive model.[36] Joan Cadden argues, however, that women who had sex with women are less visible in our sources because women's sexuality was construed as passive even within same-sex couplings, and therefore of less concern to the social order.[37] Queer theorists too accept Karras' thesis to an extent, but have gently pushed back in

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[32] For the original and inimitable insights of Zemon Davis, see her 'Women on Top', *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, 1975), 124-151; P. Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2011), 42; K. L. French, 'To Free Them from Binding: Women in the Late Medieval English Parish, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27:3 (1997), 387-412, at 392; N. D. Guynn, *Pure Filth: Ethics, Politics, and Religion in Early French Farce* (Philadelphia, 2020), 151-53.

[33] On explicit sexual images as carnivalesque, see the accompanying catalogue to the 2000 exhibition 'Carnivalesque', which focused on explicit artefacts, medieval and modern: *Carnivalesque*, eds. T. Hyman and R. Malbert (London, 2000); Thomas Laqueur and Caroline Walker Bynum have similarly argued for a sexual binary along these lines, with a focus on bodies, see Laqueur, *Making Sex*; C. W. Bynum, 'The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages', in her *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), 181-238.

[34] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 5.

[35] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 148.

[36] H. Puff, 'Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetseldorf', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30:1 (2003), 41-62; C. Lansing, 'Donna con Donna?: A 1295 Inquest into Female Sodomy', *Sexuality and Culture in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, ed. P. M. Soergel (New York, 2005), 109-122; D. Elliot, 'Women in Love: Carnal and Spiritual Transgressions in Late Medieval France', *Living Dangerously: On the Margins in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* eds. B. Hanawalt and A. Grotans (Notre Dame, 2007), 55-86; J. Roelens, 'Visible Women: Female Sodomy in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Southern Netherlands (1400-1550)', *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 130:3 (2015), 3-24.

[37] J. Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1993), 223-4.

terms of why women's sexuality is less visible. Margaret Hunt proposes that this relative silence does not emerge from a social assumption of passivity: rather it is the result of social control and surveillance of women and of their sexual and reproductive lives.[38] Karma Lochrie meanwhile finds that there *were* widely held 'binary categories of active and passive' in medieval society, but builds on Hunt's work to argue that class, as much as gender, impacted the extent of policing same-sex sexuality, especially during periods of apparently heightened concern.[39]

In order to make use of Lochrie's insight, we need to consider the wider social context of later medieval England. This thesis will argue, among other things, that discourses around women and sexuality are illegible without consideration of how they relate more widely to the social reproduction of gendered oppression, a process that changed over time. This will be explored in more detail in Chapter One, but I will briefly map significant themes in the historiographical discussion of developments in women's social position here.

Representations of female transgression, and related anxieties about the patriarchal domestic order, are contingent on the specific circumstances in which they are found. Historiographical debate on the economic and social position of women in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries largely concerns the influence of the plague on gender relations. Jeremy Goldberg, among others, has suggested that the decades after the arrival of epidemic disease brought novel labour opportunities for women in urban areas, even if advances in economic power were not followed by wholesale progress in other areas such as legal recourse and socio-cultural attitudes.[40] There is cause to question this narrative. Judith Bennett argues that the situation of women remained constant during this period, with a 'patriarchal equilibrium' ensuring that ameliorations in conditions for women, such as higher wages, were met with deterioration in other

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[38] M. Hunt, 'Afterword', *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. J. Goldberg (Durham, N.C., 1994), 359-377, at 373.
[39] K. Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia, 2012), 197.
[40] P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire, c. 1300-1520* (1992); C. M. Barron, 'The 'Golden Age of Women' in Late Medieval London', *Women in Southern England: Reading Medieval Studies* 15 (1989), 35-58; S. H. Rigby, 'Gendering the Black Death: Women in Later Medieval England', *Gender in History* 12:3 (2000), 745-754.

avenues.[41] Here we look to track how gendered representations operated in particular contexts, informed by Bennett's argument that changes in expression may mask consistencies in operation. This focus reveals much about perceptions, if not always the experiences, of later medieval women, and especially economically and/or sexually active unmarried singlewomen. Most vitally, we can see that, as Lochrie suggests, the unstable social conditions of later medieval England were precisely of the kind in which discourses that sought to control women had to adapt to new circumstances.

We can also apply the context of the emergence of the north-European marriage pattern. John Hajnal was the first to draw attention to demographic changes with regards to marriage in later medieval northwestern Europe. There were two notable shifts: first, the relatively high age at marriage; and second, the high proportion of people who never married at all.[42] So it was that 'singlewomen' seem to have become a socially significant group at this time, and Maryanne Kowaleski's synthesis, whilst nuancing these conclusions, nonetheless confirms their increased visibility in legal sources.[43] Cordelia Beattie has traced the appearance of 'singlewomen' in penitential, fiscal, and guild records from the end of the fourteenth century.[44] This may be a perceived new semantic visibility only – we do not have the sources for earlier to say for certain.

In a recent call to rethink the implications of the north-European marriage pattern, Judith Bennett has demonstrated its presence in England from around 1250 onwards, and has utterly detached later or never-marriage from economic prosperity.[45] In light of this, I do not see the

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[41] J. M. Bennett, 'Theoretical Issues: Confronting Continuity', *Journal of Women's History* 9:3 (1997), 73-94, at 83.
[42] J. J. Hajnal, 'European Marriage Patterns in Perspective', in *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography*, eds. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (Chicago, 1965), 101-43, at 101, 116-20.
[43] M. Kowaleski, 'Gendering Demographic Change in the Middle Ages', in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, eds. J. M. Bennett and R. Karras (Oxford, 2013), 181-192, at 187; idem., 'Singlewomen in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Demographic Perspective', in *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250-1800*, eds. J. Bennett and A. M. Froide (Philadelphia, 1999), 38-81, at 46-8, 50-1.
[44] C. Beattie, *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2007).
[45] J. M. Bennett, 'Wretched Girls, Wretched Boys, and the European Marriage Pattern in England (c. 1250-1350)', *Continuity and Change* 34:3 (2019), 315-47.

development in the period under consideration as one necessarily of demographics, but rather one of attitudes. In her recent exploration of medieval marriage, van Houts found it 'frustrating' that this apparent abundance of singlewomen was not more evident in the literary sources that she surveyed: 'The absence of the single life in the source base, compared with the modern…assumption of their ubiquity, remains a puzzle I leave to others to solve'.[46] This is very much our cue: this thesis aims to demonstrate that singlewomen were not strangely absent, but indeed vocally present in literary source bases, and further that the literary focus on their being sexually active is entangled with their social position.

APPROACHES TO SEXUALITY

The silence around women's pleasure can also be linked to historians' interpretative choices. Underlying the narratives I have outlined above are some deeper assumptions and notions. The purpose of the following section is to explore the theoretical underpinnings of histories of pre-modern sexuality. Historians have landed on a broad range of terms to describe content relating to sex and sexuality that we might view on a rough spectrum:

> High register: love; romantic; courtly; desire; erotic.
> Ambivalent: indiscreet; ribald; bawdy; explicit.
> Low register: vulgar; offensive; obscene; taboo.

We might add others, but this spectrum serves to indicate that representations of sexuality are often categorised to try and say something about what is within or outside of acceptable behaviour, or what is decent and indecent, in a given society.[47] This no doubt helps us towards an understanding of the relationship between a text and the social world in which it is read, and further, how attitudes about what is transgressive are reproduced. For example, taboos in medieval sermons, such as the tale of the incestuous daughter, simultaneously reiterate unacceptable sexual

[46] Van Houts, *Married Life in the Middle Ages*, 252.
[47] See for example F. Eustace, *Secular Carolling in Late Medieval England* (Leeds, 2022), 65.

relationships while conveying the moral message that even the worst of sins do not preclude forgiveness and redemption.[48]

Clearly, the articulation of sexuality and sexual norms has developed a great deal over time; but our words inevitably impose interpretative choices, no matter how careful we are. Let us consider two operative terms, 'obscenity' and 'desire', to examine how their theoretical underpinnings occlude and complicate scholars' reception of evidence for women's sexual pleasure.

OBSCENITY

Some recent studies have selected 'obscenity' as a mode of understanding how sexually explicit texts and images were interpreted by their medieval viewers.[49] Obscenity, by modern standards, indicates explicit speech or imagery which has the potential, whether intended or not, to shock or offend.[50] To analyse something as obscene, we must understand two things. First, that the function of an obscenity in literary texts is to be obscene, whether to provoke, to insult, or for comedic effect. For Leslie Dunton-Downer, the content itself, or what we might call the signified, is less important than this affective function.[51] Second, that determining a word as obscene lies in the

[48] Here I mean taboo in the cultural rather than anthropological sense; R. Moss, *Fatherhood and its Representations in Middle English Texts* (Woodbridge, 2013), 115; 'The Incestuous Daughter', *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse*, ed. G. Shuffleton (Kalamazoo, 2008).

[49] R. J. Pearcy, 'Modes of Signification and the Humor of Obscene Diction in the Fabliaux', in *The Humour of the Fabliaux: a collection of critical essays*, eds. T. D. Cooke and B. L. Honeycutt (Columbia, 1974), 163-196. *Obscenity, Social Control, & Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, ed. J. M. Ziolkowski (Leiden, 1998); *Medieval Obscenities*, ed. N. McDonald (Woodbridge, 2006); N. N. Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* (Philadelphia, 2016); C. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: transgressive talk and sexual education in late medieval Britain (Ithaca, N.Y., 2018).*

[50] J. M. Ziolkowski, 'Introduction', *Obscenity, Social Control, and Artistic Creation*, 3-18, at 9, invokes intent to shock as defining obscenity; S. Gaunt, 'Obscene Hermeneutics in Troubadour Lyric', in *Medieval Obscenities*, ed. N. McDonald (Woodbridge, 2006), 85-104, at 85, defines obscenity by reception rather than intention.

[51] L. Dunton-Downer, 'Poetic Language and the Obscene', *Obscenity, Social Control, and Artistic Creation*, 19-40, at 25.

attitudes of its social context, whether invoked by the writer or audience – and that includes historians.[52]

This presents us with all manner of interpretative issues, all of which come back to alterity. Our reactions are not necessarily reflective of our source material, so we risk imposing our own perceptions of obscenity. Moreover, if we are trying to reach for a social reality behind an obscene utterance – to establish what *actions* were obscene – we must determine the extent to which we imagine that norms within artistic representation are attached to actual expectations for sexual conduct.[53] We cannot assume that norms governing speech are the same norms that govern acts. Neither of these issues is in fact particular to obscenity. For example, in relation to humour, Baldwin warns himself (and his readers) that 'I can never be assured that I share a sense of the comic with medieval audiences'.[54] But if we intend to attach a potentially pejorative and unstable category to our interpretations, it seems particularly vital that we know that we are doing so in line with contemporary attitudes.

One explanatory model for obscenity is to view it as a parody of a given culture's dominant ideology, or what Pierre Bec called *contre-textes*.[55] Examining troubadour lyrics, he found that obscene lyrics parodied orthodox forms and structures. Bec was evidently influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's search for the 'prehistory' of novelistic discourse, which he found in French literary forms of the thirteenth century:

> The great parodic literature of the Middle Ages was created in an atmosphere of holidays and festivals. There was no genre, no text, no prayer, no saying that did not receive its parodic equivalent.[56]

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[52] M. H. Caviness, 'Obscenity and Alterity: Images that Shock and Offend Us/ Them, Now/ Then?', *Obscenity, Social Control, and Artistic Creation*, 155-175, at 155; Relatedly, taboo also requires external societal definition.

[53] This strand of reception theory is informed by Hans Robert Jauss' concept of 'horizons of expectation', for which see his 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory', *New Literary History* 2:1 (1970), 7-37, at 13.

[54] Baldwin, *The Language of Sex*, xxvii.

[55] P. Bec, *Burlesque et obscénitié chez les troubadours. Le contre-texte au moyen* âge (Paris, 1984).

[56] M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. E. C. Holquist (Austin, 1981), 74.

Understanding this dependency is central to much of our understanding of comic effect in medieval literature; the joke rests on – and may only even exist as a result of – its generic opposite. The impact of Bakhtin, often via Bec, is palpable wherever scholars invoke obscenity.[57]

Most recently, Carissa Harris argues that obscenity's 'inherent transgression and capacity to agitate' makes it a useful teaching tool.[58] She builds from feminist theorist Mary Caputi's argument that obscenity determinedly violates social rules specifically because this underscores 'their reason for being'.[59] Harris' invocation of the obscene is most effective when it is applied to gratuitous scenes of sexual violence, where the intent is indeed to disturb and shock as a method of moral or social instruction. But in scenes of consent and mutuality, the purpose of obscenity is less clearly signalled.

I am cautious about adopting obscenity as the primary lens of analysis for the texts discussed in this thesis. In the above studies, obscenity very clearly operates as a function of the carnivalesque, where representations of women's active sexuality are taken as transgressive. Without a fuller social study, we cannot know what actions were judged obscene, but the effect of this interpretative approach is at least partly to marginalise the voicing of women's sexuality, treating it as a low-register 'counter-text'. I cannot help but find this to be circular. If a text discusses women's pleasure for any reason other than procreation, it must be transgressive. The words used are obscene because the acts the words signify are transgressive. By this logic, the discussion of sexuality, even perhaps sexuality itself, is rendered illicit and marginal.

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[57] C. Muscatine, 'The Fabliaux, Courtly Culture, and the (Re)Invention of Vulgarity, *Obscenity, Social Control, and Artistic Creation*, 281-292, at 282; S. Gaunt, *Medieval Obscenity*; E. Dillon, *Medieval Obscenity*; C. Weising, 'A Vision of "Sexuality", "Obscenity", or "Nudity"? Regional Differences in the Images of Corbels', in *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, eds. A. Classen and M. Sandidge (Berlin, 2008), 325-382; L. O. Vasvari Fainberg, 'Obscene Onomastics in Medieval Trickster Tales', *Ehumanista: Journal of Iberian Studies* 15 (2010), 1-20.

[58] Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies,* 2.

[59] M. Caputi, *Voluptuous Yearnings: towards a feminist theory of the obscene* (Lanham, Md., 1993), 7, quoted in Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 2.

DESIRE

Desire is almost ubiquitous in studies of medieval sexuality, and it is used to convey a range of subject positions: it may be a way of talking about sexual practice or fantasy; but also sexual identity and preference.[60] Few would now claim to mean desire in the Freudian sense, but Freud is nevertheless the starting point for later psychoanalytic frameworks that are still prevalent in medieval scholarship, if less explicitly so.[61] As such, it is worth sketching through his ideas, as well as some of the prominent revisions and rejections of them, to understand how they have structured medieval scholars' approaches to their source material. Freud's theory of personality development and impairment conceptualises low levels of sexual desire as a dissociation from the sexual instinct, typically resulting from defence mechanisms developed during sexual maturation. Low desire, he asserted, would be more likely to occur in women, since girls showed a greater tendency toward inhibition and repression than boys. Men further possessed greater intensity of innate libido - Freud's preferred term for desire - than women.[62] Thomas D. Cooke and Howard Bloch both argue for a pornographic function in *fabliaux*, albeit with different emphases: Bloch reads a titillating linguistic experience where speech substitutes the sexual act, while Cooke views the sexuality of the *fabliaux* in entirely negative terms, a reflection of aggressive male sexuality that reduces women to objects.[63]

Neo-Freudians both extended and challenged many of Freud's views of personality development, but overall, they downplayed the sexual nature of libido. For example, Carl Jung viewed libido as energy of the mind that could be directed not just toward sexual ends, but also

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[60] G. Walker, 'Framing Premodern Desires Between Sexuality, Sin, and Crime: An Introduction', in *Framing Premodern Desires: Sexual Ideas, Attitudes, and Practices in Europe*, eds. S. Lidman et al (Amsterdam, 2017), 9-28, at 9.

[61] This is cross-pollination: on Freud and medievalism, see A. Bolzinger, 'Freud et le Moyen Âge Rhénan', *Le Coq-Héron* 205:2 (2011), 89-102.

[62] S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: The 1905 Edition*, trans. U. Kistner (London, 2017); Ead., *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. M. C. Waldrep (First pub. 1920; Mineola, N.Y., 2017).

[63] H. Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago, 1986), 19, 69-70; T. D. Cooke, 'Pornography, the Comic Spirit, and the Fabliaux', in *The Humour of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. T. D. Cooke and B. L. Honeycutt (Columbia, 1974), 137-62, at 147.

toward creativity and other productive purposes.[64] For Lacan, as we have already seen, desire was a universal solvent. Lacanian psychoanalysis argues that desire has a metonymic quality, and at the same time there is the trace of separation: desire is that which can never be fulfilled.[65] Jung and Lacan both to an extent favoured an 'ungendered' approach, but both were ultimately unable to free themselves from Freud's misogyny - his instinctive view of male sexuality as normative, and women's sexuality as an impoverished version of it.

In this framework, men's desire is broad in both impetus and consequence.[66] This masculine-focused frame does not readily lend itself to conceiving of and talking about women's expression of sexuality. Further, women's sexual desire has yet to be considered as being part of a broader matrix of women *desiring*. This is due in great part to desiring-in-general being considered in the psycho-analytical framework in terms of expression of status in a male public sphere: desire for power, desire for office, both routinely seen as male ambition.[67] So, in attempts to talk about women's desire and women's social agency, it is crucial to recognise that they are both often discounted on the same grounds. A woman's desire, like her movement through the world, is (according to this logic) inward and private. A history of women's sexuality grounded, whether consciously or not, in this line of thinking is bound to support underlying assumptions about women's societal position more generally.

Integrated use of psychoanalytic ideas to understand the function of literary texts received considerable attention in the last decades of the twentieth century, and especially in studies of the *fabliaux*. Sustained applications of Lacan's work are illuminating in terms of how texts might give licence to sexuality, precisely because (it is argued) the desire signified cannot be fulfilled.

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[64] C. G. Jung, 'The Transformation of Libido', in *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 5: Symbols of Transformation*, ed. G. Adler and R. F. C. Hull (2nd. ed., New York, 1976), 142-170.
[65] K. Harvey and C. Shalom, 'Introduction', in idem eds., *Language and Desire: Encoding Sex, Romance, and Intimacy* (London, 1997), 1-20, at 1.
[66] Freudian desire, even at its most crude, still does find its way into historical works; see Shorter, *Written in the Flesh*, 94.
[67] R. J. Levin, 'Human Male Sexuality: Appetite and Arousal, Desire and Drive, in *Appetite: Neural and Behavioural Bases*, eds. C. R. Legg and D. Booth (Oxford, 1994), 127-158, at 127.

Alexandre Leupin's *Barbarolexis* resists the positioning of the *fabliaux* within in any kind of reality.[68] For him, Lacanian psychoanalysis is the only discipline equipped critically to approach the inscription of desire. In *Barbarolexis* and in his earlier *Le graal et la littérature* (1982), he considers the writing of the *fabliaux* to be within an 'enfilade de miroirs', a labyrinth of mirrors, where the unnameability of desire produces endlessly reflexive (and necessarily distortive) discourse around its indescribable object.[69]

The absent locus – the desire that cannot be fulfilled – lends the *fabliaux* a certain level of displacement. Simon Gaunt is guided by these insights.[70] He draws attention to the ways in which the genre is aware of its own separation of speaking and doing, quoting the *D Text* of *La Damoiselle qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre*:

> Par cest essanple monstrer vueil
> Que femes n'aient point d'orgueil
> De foutre paller [sic] hautement,
> Qant il foutent tot igalement:
> Miedres raison est que se haucent.
> Teus en parolent qui l'essaucent,
> Quar molt a entre faire et dire![71]
>
> [Through this example I wish to show that women should not be ashamed to speak openly of fucking when they are fucking: it is more reasonable for them to boast. People talk about it to increase its importance for there is a huge difference between doing it and talking about it!]

The text is 'a space for the play of desire', then, but signifying is not the same as, and certainly cannot be reduced to, what is signified.[72] Just as obscenity can involve conscious excess as a mode of communication, desire too emphasises the distance between the textual and experiential. This brings to our attention the degree of separation, giving the text an autonomy of its own. And yet

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68 A. Leupin, *Barbarolexis: medieval writing and sexuality*, trans. K. Cooper (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 12-14.
69 A. Leupin, *Le graal et la littérature: étude sur la vulgate Arthurienne en prose* (Lausanne, 1982), 14.
70 S. Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge, 1995).
71 'De la demoiselle qui ne pouvait ouir parler de foutre', in *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux: variantes, remaniements, dégradations*, ed. J. Rychner (2 vols., Neuchâtel, 1960), ii, 135, ll. 225-30, quoted in Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 284; Gaunt's translation.
72 Leupin, *Barbarolexis*, 4.

– there is still an essentially male structuring of desire at work.[73] Gaunt argues that the inability to reach or signify desire has a licensing function for men; because the sex being spoken about is not 'real', the consequences are equally unreal. But what is the effect for women, whose desire is as unlicensed in 'reality' as it is in text? For Gaunt, the women of the *fabliaux* unconsciously play into their own subjection.[74] This misses the point that *fabliaux* actively work to represent female desire in a way that largely serves male dominant discourse. So there is a double unreachability for women here that is not 'unconscious', incidental, or in any way passive. It is the construction of largely male authors and male-oriented interpretations.

I have considered obscenity and desire together here because I think that although they are conceptually distinct, and used by scholars to analyse quite different phenomena in the history of sexuality, the effect of their theoretical structuring is similar: to silence, disempower, or otherwise occlude women's sexual expression. To return, then, to Hélène Cixous: she is perhaps the strongest critique of psychoanalytic articulations of sexual difference, whether those of Freud or those of Lacan. Her essay 'The Laugh of Medusa' refuses to accept women as mute icons of the pre-symbolic order. Conversely, she encourages a gentler, more playful and material approach to language as a means of circumventing (undermining?) the embedded power dynamics.[75] She recognises that using these dynamics as a starting point can only ever lead to defining women in terms of lack; and 'what's a desire originating from lack? A pretty meagre desire'.[76] She views women's semantic play, particularly puns, as a way of destabilizing sexual hierarchy within language that embraces fullness rather than lack – what she calls 'the wonder of being several'.[77] Cixous' 'severalness' is the touchstone for what follows.

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[73] Leupin, *Barbarolexis*, 5.
[74] Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, 283-4.
[75] H. Cixous, 'The Laugh of Medusa', trans K. Cohen and P. Cohen, *Signs* 1:4 (1976), 875-93.
[76] Ibid., 891.
[77] Ibid., 889; see Barthes also on 'the neutral' for taking up this idea for silence.

TOWARDS A DIFFERENT APPROACH: EMBRACING FULLNESS

In this section, I will explain my theoretical approach to giving precedence to sexual pleasure. Historians have hitherto primarily looked at women's sexuality by researching episodes of sexual violence or subjugation.[78] This is in part because methodologically – for all the reasons discussed above – we have been ill-equipped to think about women's gratification and sexual subjectivity. By sexual subjectivity, I mean approaching medieval women as having the capacity to make sexual choices, with nuanced responses, and complex relationships with their bodies and social world. In this, I draw on the influential work of Sharon Horne and Melanie J. Zimmer-Gimbeck, and their psychological definition of sexual subjectivity. That is, 'the dimension of sexual self-concept that encompasses thoughts, feelings, and sensations related to one's body, entitlement to sexual pleasure, sexual self-efficacy, and sexual self-reflection'.[79] How can we recover this kind of subjectivity for the Middle Ages, and give it due weight?

A useful starting-point will be the study of women's sexual pleasure – the key theme of this thesis. I explain the stakes of viewing women's sexuality in these terms, and the existing historiography that helps us to understand expectations and expressions of pleasure. I then place these ideas in the context of medieval consent studies. This field is still in its early stages, and one of the overall claims of this thesis is that it is necessary and possible to create space in medieval consent studies to examine affirmative or active consent, a concept I define below.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The search for women's pleasure in the later Middle Ages necessarily begins with texts. But central to this thesis is a decision to recognise the texts under discussion as unstable, and from here, to

[78] For example, in a recent volume on medieval sadomasochism – deriving sexual gratification from the interaction of receiving and inflicting pain – one chapter focuses on the 'unpleasure' of women's discomfort or pain during penetrative sex, see J. Dresvina, "'I am not having what she's having": Female sexual (un)pleasure medieval and modern', *Painful Pleasures: Sadomasochism in Medieval Cultures*, ed. C. Vaccaro, Manchester, 2022), 209-234.

[79] S. Horne and M. J. Zimmer-Gimbeck 'Female Sexual Subjectivity and Well-being: Comparing Late Adolescents with Different Sexual Experiences', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of NSRC* 2 (2005), 25-40, at 25.

explore and account for the sense of dialogue in reception. Two theoretical positions inform my thinking. Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the novel taught us that the dialogism within a text reveals different perspectives: we are meant to see the positioning of both author and characters.[80] Even within this, there is a further multiplicity of tongues within a single language. Bakhtin calls this 'heteroglossia', competing discourses that speak to a multiplicity of purposes and audiences. So, there is a conversation in constant flux between the text and the social worlds within and outside of it. When medieval women's narratives are examined, scholars rarely make room for the nuance of multiple viewpoints being revealed at any given moment. This often results in analysis that cedes centre stage to apparently dominant masculine discourses and works to demonstrate how female narratives either confirm or reject these. If a woman experiences extra-marital pregnancy, for example, we assume that she must regret the act that caused the pregnancy. This is of course possible, perhaps likely even – but what if her description of extra-marital sex reads positively? We must be willing to hold these expressions together, even when they appear contradictory.

My other theoretical concern is how to relate texts about pleasure to what we have referred to as the dominant social code, and yet to avoid describing them as *contre-textes*, counter-discourses, or otherwise marginalised in relation to an orthodox centre. In other words – what are they, if not carnivalesque? Julia Kristeva presents an alternative. In social practice, there are determinants, whether economic, political, or otherwise. These in combination produce the dominant social code; Kristeva calls these factors 'systematic constraints'.[81] Alongside systematic constraints, there are also signifying rules. In her words: 'the *major constraint* affecting any social practice lies in the fact that it signifies, i.e., that it is articulated like a language'.[82] Now here is the problem, says Kristeva: semiotics is a theory of social practice, using language as its model. The scope of

[80] M. Bakhtin, 'The Word in the Novel', trans. A. Shukman, in *Comparative Criticism 2*, ed. E. Shaffer (Cambridge, 1980), 213-20, at 219.
[81] J. Kristeva, 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T. Moi (New York, 1986), 24-33, at 31.
[82] Ibid., 25.

discovery for semiotic research must, then, be restricted to that which language can express! To put it another way, semiotics (*our* analytical frame) is obedient to systematic constraints (*our* dominant social code). The 'science of linguistics has no way of apprehending anything in language which belongs not with the social contract but with play, pleasure, or desire'.[83] So pleasure – and Kristeva is speaking about women's pleasure – is a crucial pressure point in semiotic research, where its redeployment as a critique of the semiotician's own presuppositions becomes possible: 'its *raison d'être*, if it is to have one, must consist in its identifying the systematic constraint within each signifying practice…but above all in going beyond that to signifying just what, within each practice, falls outside that system'.[84]

My theoretical position is to place Kristeva's insight – that women's pleasure can be deployed as a frame with which to identify our own suppositions – in conversation with Cixous' attention to women's pleasure as semantic playfulness, as turning silence to imaginative redeployment of available language.[85] Once we accept that the silence is as much our own as it is (supposedly) medieval, we can recognise that while women's sexuality is not expressed or represented along the same axes as men's, that is not the same thing as it not being expressed at all. Rather, women's pleasure explodes the parameters of what can be described via wordplay. In turn, its expression in language must necessarily prompt us to adjust what we see as dominant.

READING FOR PLEASURE

Pleasure is notable for its absence in the spectrum of approaches discussed so far. It is far harder to place than desire, and therefore barely figures in historians' discussion of sexuality. There are few sustained discussions of pleasure in medieval scholarship.[86] Jacques Le Goff is perhaps the

[83] Ibid., 26.
[84] Ibid., 26-7.
[85] They would self-describe as strange bedfellows, for which see T. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York, 1985), 95-9.
[86] Some recent collections on pleasure, broadly conceived, include: *Pleasure in the Middle Ages: Collected Papers from the 2013 Leeds International Medieval Congress*, eds. I. N. Wood et al, *Mirabilia* 18 (2014); *Sensual and Sensory Experiences in the Middle Ages: on Pleasure, Fear, Desire, and Pain*, ed. C. Muntaner (Cambridge, 2017); *Pleasure*

earliest historian to dedicate an article to the subject, concluding that pleasure in a sexual sense was repudiated in the Middle Ages.[87] More often, pleasure appears a secondary consideration to love, or desire, although it might as easily be associated with playfulness and leisure.[88]

Pleasure is as messy a term as desire or obscenity, but with less of the emotional and analytical baggage. Unlike the famous incompleteness of desire, pleasure indicates something of joy and fulfilment whether practised or imagined, however fleeting or problematic. Pleasures are not exclusively sensual, or even bodily, but configured as an experience in the body, mind, or soul.[89] In Middle English, 'plesire' carries associations of enjoyment and satisfaction.[90] It can be stimulated by virtue or vice, and the result can be natural or unnatural, not necessarily along the same axis.

Pleasure in moderation was physically beneficial from a Galenic perspective, invigorating the movement of humours and producing warmth for the ideal conditions for procreation.[91] Even more functionally, pleasure was sometimes simply associated with purging superfluous matter, since the retention of semen – male or female – could cause medical problems.[92] It is equally true that excessive sexual activity was also seen as harmful – moderation is the key word here – but medical authorities clearly regarded physically and emotionally pleasurable sex as a promoter of good health.[93] However, from the apostle Paul onwards, Christian moralists and teachers began

in the Middle Ages, eds. N. Cohen-Hanegbi and P. Nagy (2018). These do not expressly consider that women could experience pleasure in sex.

87 J. Le Goff, 'Le Refus du plaisir', *L'Histoire* 63 (1984), 52-59.

88 S. V. Kitanov, 'Displeasure in Heaven, Pleasure in Hell: Four Franciscan Masters on the Relationship between Love and Pleasure, and Hatred and Displeasure', *Traditio* 58 (2003), 285-340.

89 N. Cohen-Hanegbi and P. Nagy, 'Pleasure in the Middle Ages: An Introduction', in *Pleasure in the Middle Ages*, eds. eaedem (Turnhout, 2018), xi-xxii, at xiii.

90 MED plesire n. 2(a) A feeling of pleasure, enjoyment, liking; (b) a pleasing quality or thing; a source of pleasure; a loved one; (c) sensual pleasure; sexual satisfaction.

91 S. Knuuttila, *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford, 2004), 222; J. Lydgate, 'A Dietary, and a Doctrine for the Pestilence', *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate: Part II, Secular Poems*, ed. H. N. MacCracken, (London, 1934; repr. 1961), 703-6; similarly see 'merry' as a synonym for 'healthy' in P. C. Maddern, '"It is Full Merry in Heaven": The Pleasurable Connotations of "Merriment" in Late Medieval England', in *Pleasure in the Middle Ages*, 21-38, at 25-6.

92 Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 77.

93 N. Cohen-Hanegbi, 'Bodily Pleasures: Medieval Medical Counsel in Context', in *Pleasure in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2018), 59-76, at 60-61.

to discuss the moral status of sexual pleasure: did God make sex pleasurable by design, or was it part of the Fall, and a temptation intended to turn people away from God? The medieval ambivalences around pleasure, then, give us a critical starting point which is already flexible. Medieval medical sources elaborate theories of pleasure for both men and women as necessary for procreation. Here, then, was a space in which pleasure was not only permissible, but essential. Discussions in medical tracts of women's pleasure were both explicit and encouraging.[94]

Finally, then, this thesis is concerned with enunciation: how pleasure was expressed, once we recognise that it was available as a potential result of sex. Particularly important here is Nicola McDonald's work on household games, which centres women's sexual exploration and experimentation via leisure. In one call and response card game, players reveal their hands to respond to each other in mischievous and flirtatious ways. There is potential for testing out talking about bodies and desires in a safe context. McDonald has relatedly suggested that elite groupings including the aristocracy and gentry could permit spaces and contexts where flirtation was permitted but only within certain properly controlled situations.[95]

Explorations of pleasure thus can focus on the empowering potential of sharing sexual knowledge. The work of Carissa Harris opens out experimental spaces for learning about pleasure in her *Obscene Pedagogies*, which views both canonical and more obscure literary texts about sex as having educative potential. In one chapter, she examines 'Women's songs'. Harris uses a sociological framework to argue that lyrics (which she reads as obscene) can be read as a pedagogy, a kind of 'sex education' that uses sexually explicit material to teach women about negotiating sexual contexts and seeking mutual pleasure.[96]

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[94] My article on Middle English reception of gynaecological tracts, "Not Just (or at least, not only) Bawdy: Pleasure-Seeking in Later Medieval England', for *Medieval Feminist Forum*, eds. L Akard and A. Raw, is forthcoming. See also Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 99.

[95] N. McDonald, 'Fragments of *(Have Your) Desire*: Brome Women at Play', *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England*, ed. P.J.P. Goldberg and M. Kowaleski (Cambridge, 2008), 232-58, at 257; see also B. Kane, 'Defamation, Gender and Hierarchy in Late Medieval Yorkshire', *Social History* 43:3 (2018), 356-374, at 367; Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 162–67.

[96] Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 151.

Within Medieval Studies, the continued privileging of masculine discourse in considerations of sexuality is at least partly informed by texts that we consider to be part of the Middle English literary canon. Whether scholars foreground the role of the literary generation of Chaucer, Langland, and Gower as largely responsible for a vernacular literary authority, or that of conscious Lancastrian policy in the emergence of a standard through Chancery English, the result is the same: known (overwhelmingly male) writers form the foundation on which our understanding of all other texts is based.[97] Since at least the 1990s work on non-canonical texts in medieval studies, as well as critical engagement with how we situate the canon, has flourished.[98] However, and perhaps a little surprisingly, studies of sexuality are a little behind the curve.[99] The Middle English literary canon, in particular the works of Chaucer and Malory, continue to be a central strain in analysing women's sexuality.[100] I am of the view that both authors can certainly be read to understand a range of cultural, legal, and literary elisions and collusions around sexual violence; what they cannot do is tell us anything generative about women's active consent or pleasure.[101] It is however possible

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[97] J. Catto, 'Written English: The Making of a Language 1370-1400', *Past & Present* 179 (2003), 24-59, at 25; J. Fisher, 'A Language Policy for Lancastrian England', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 107:5 (1992), 1168-1180, at 1170.

[98] See P. Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, 1992), 7-8; *Other Voices, Other Views: Expanding the Canon in English Renaissance Studies*, eds. M. V. Silcox et al (Newark, Del., 1999).

[99] For example: Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure*, 2; *Medieval Futurity: Essays for the future of a queer medieval studies*, eds. W. Rogers and C. M. Roman (Berlin, 2021), essays by M. Goodrich, H. Swenson.

[100] For a recent treatment that seeks to re-orient female desire in a way that is not dependent on male definitions, see L. M. Allen-Goss, *Female Desire in Chaucer's* Legend of Good Women *and Middle English Romance* (Cambridge, 2020). But the central text used to 'access' female desire is by Chaucer; Malory also features.

[101] Malory is accepted as being a historic perpetrator of sexual violence, for which see C. Batt, 'Malory and Rape, *Arthuriana* 7:3 (1997), 78-99. The debate around Chaucer's proximity to sexual violence involves a heated and ongoing debate about documents relating to the quitclaim of Cecily Chaumpaigne. For the earlier discussion, see C. Cannon, 'Raptus in the Chaumpaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document Concerning the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer', *Speculum* 68 (1993), 74-94; R. Warburton, 'Reading Rape in Chaucer; or, Are Cecily, Lucretia, and Philomela Good Women?', in *Diversifying the Discourse: The Florence Howe Award for Outstanding Feminist Scholarship, 1990–2004*, eds. M. Suzuki and R. Dufault (New York, 2006), 270-87. This debate has recently been informed by the discovery of a new document that reveals Chaumpaigne was Chaucer's servant; I and other scholars are of the view that this discovery does not undermine the quitclaim for *raptus*. Indeed, as Chaucer's servant she may have been even more vulnerable. For the presentation of the case and new document, see S. Fein and D. Raybin eds., 'Special Issue: The Case of Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecily Chaumpaigne: New Evidence', *The Chaucer Review* 57:4 (2022). For a preview of a forthcoming rebuttal, see R. Green, in 'Forthcoming Publications', *The New Chaucer Society Newsletter* 39.2 (2022), 10.

to situate the Middle English literary canon responsibly. The work of Carissa Harris does precisely this, putting texts that privilege perpetrators' narratives – both in content and authorship – productively in conversation with texts that present fictive survivor testimonies.[102]

This thesis therefore takes stock of literary conventions and makes reference to canonical texts where there are useful links to be made, but starts from the position that these should not form the main basis for our reading. In this, I argue for an ethical feminist reading of Middle English texts. I am guided by scholars, particularly of classical texts, who have demonstrated the vital importance of this practice. Stephanie McCarter offers a clear statement of the stakes in relation to translating Ovid's *Metamorpheses*:

> A feminist lens allows the translator to examine the cultural forces that have shaped previous translations so that she herself can *resist* retrojecting anachronistic assumptions and stereotypes onto her source text – and in doing so she can better communicate its complexities and nuances.[103]

For McCarter, then, feminist translation undoes some of the assumptions, and at times, violence, of modern scholarship. I shift attention to less well-known texts, and – as indicated above – to the potential for multiple meanings for writers, readers, and listeners; and I want to consider how we might hold all these together in our analysis. Specifically, I seek to give space to readings where pleasure and mutuality are one potential outcome.

Existing Frameworks: Consent Studies

The theme of sexual negotiation brings me to the final and most significant body of research for this thesis.[104] The burgeoning field of medieval consent studies examines both the legal and cultural

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[102] Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 63-66.
[103] S. McCarter, 'Ovid's Callisto and Feminist Translation of the Metamorphoses', *Eugesta* 12 (2022), 137-69, at 138. See also E. Wilson, 'Translating Homer as a Woman', *Homer's Daughters: Women's Responses to Homer in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, eds. F. Cox and E. Theodorakopoulos (Oxford, 2010), 279-97.
[104] Medieval consent studies is informed by the related and flourishing sociological and philosophical fields of consent studies, for which see: b. hooks, 'Seduced by violence no more', in *Transforming a Rape Culture*, eds. E. Buchwald, P. R. Fletcher, and M. Roth (Minneapolis, 1993), 293-300; L. Alcoff and L. Gray, 'Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18:2 (1993), 260-90; N. Gavey, *Just Sex?: The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape* (London, 2005); V. Smith, *Not Just Race,*

scaffolding of consent, and women's responses and experiences, real and fictive. Understanding the conditions in which potentially pleasurable sex took place requires us to look with directness at the opposite: at instances of sexual violence, and the structures that enabled it. Both consent and non-consent are central to demonstrating the parameters and dangers of sexual negotiation as well as its possibilities. Here, I identify the key developments in medieval consent studies, distinguishing between three central concepts: sexual violence; coerced consent; and affirmative or active consent. In order to understand what active consent might look like in a specific historical context, we must also be alert to presentations of non-consent.[105]

The study of sexual violence is an established area of historical research, and is currently in the process of developing structures for examining subjectivity. Kathryn Gravdal's *Ravishing Maidens* (1991) set the bar. Refuting the idea that rape was normalised in medieval culture, she examined French romance, *fabliaux*, and *pastourelles* to scrutinize the cultural ideology that supported and occluded 'rape as a stock narrative'.[106] She brilliantly tore to shreds the historiographical assumption that sexual violence was an unproblematic joke for medieval people:

> The timing of the humour in the *pastourelle* is key to its troping of sexual violence. Just as the text reaches the point at which the harshness of a literal depiction of rape could disconcert or culpabilize the listener and inspire sympathy for the female character, it veers off, changing tone to undercut the violence.[107]

This is key, because it demonstrates sexual violence in literary texts is not evidence that sexual violence was trivialised in medieval society.[108] The causation here is too simple. Gravdal draws our

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Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings (New York, 1998), xiii-xxiii; D. Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: the "heroic" tradition and its alternatives* (Cambridge, 1999); S. J. Brison, *Aftermath: violence and the remaking of a self* (Princeton, 2002); C. M. Mardorossian, *Framing the Rape Victim: Gender and Agency Reconsidered* (New Brunswick, 2014), 41-67; P. H. Collins, 'On Violence, Intersectionality, and Transversal Politics', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40:9 (2017), 1460-73.

[105] This has long been a concern of studies of modern women's sexuality, see collected essays in *Pleasure & Danger: Exploring female sexuality*, ed. C. S. Vance (Boston, 1984).

[106] K. Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and the Law* (Philadelphia, 1991), 1.

[107] Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 17; see also G. L. Smith, *The Medieval French Pastourelle Tradition* (2009).

[108] The 'Reeve's Tale' of Chaucer is another site of a similar debate around how much medieval readers colluded in the sexual violence of the text. For a sample of this debate see: H. Breuer, 'Being Intolerant:

attention to the ways in which authors contribute to creating and reiterating a culture of sexual violence by making the joke, but structurally protecting the reader from the most violent aspects by circumventing its representation.[109]

Coerced consent names experiences that neither consent nor non-consent fully encompass: where persistent pressure, guilt, or implied threat creates a sense of obligation or lack of alternative choices. This, of course, is no consent at all, but occupies an ambivalent position in discussions about sexual violence. Coerced sexual consent has only recently been applied to medieval contexts; much of the historiography is concerned with the related but distinct phenomena of coerced consent to marriage. This was recognised in canon law as grounds for annulment. However, Richard Helmholz and Angeliki E. Laiou have demonstrated the difficulties of proving coerced consent to marriage, in later medieval England and twelfth-century Byzantium respectively.[110]

More recently, scholars have applied modern sociological studies of coercion as a form of sexual violence to uncover multidimensional social and cognitive contexts that inform subjects' consent in response to threat, whether explicit or implicit.[111] In her work on Middle English 'Women's songs', Carissa Harris carefully discusses how consent after resistance might be a means

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Rape is Not a Seduction (in "The Reeve's Tale" or Anywhere Else)', in *The Canterbury Tales Revisited: 21st century interpretations*, ed. K. A. Bishop (Newcastle, 2008), 1-16; *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. E. Robertson and C. M. Rose (New York, 2001); R. Warburton, 'Reading Rape in Chaucer'; H. Crocker, 'Affective Politics in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29:1 (2007), 225-58.

[109] Gravdal's conclusions are further supported by the complex nexus of legal and literary concerns around rape and abduction illuminated by Caroline Dunn. Women who wanted, and were able, to litigate their assault may have sought a wide range of outcomes, and a guilty verdict was not necessarily the only expectation. C. Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100-1500* (Cambridge, 2013), 80-81.

[110] R. H. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1974), 90-94; A. E. Laiou, 'Sex, Consent, and Coercion in Byzantium', in *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*, ed. idem (Dumbarton Oaks, 1993), 109-218, at 156-167.

[111] For the separation of wanting to have sex from consenting to sex, see Z. D. Peterson and C. L. Muehlenhard, 'Conceptualizing the "Wantedness" of Women's Consensual and Non-Consensual Sexual Experiences: Implications for How Women Label Their Experiences with Rape', *The Journal of Sex Research* 44 (2007), 72-88. For impact of social and cognitive contexts, see J. Norris, P. S. Nurius, and L. A. Dimeff, 'Through Her Eyes: Factors Affecting Women's Perception of and Resistance to Acquaintance Sexual Aggression Threat', *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 20 (1996), 123-145.

of 'survival as its own resistance'.[112] The essays collected in Alison Gulley's *Teaching Rape in the Medieval Literature Classroom* apply coerced consent to a range of literary genres: saints resist sexual coercion through divine intervention; troubadours manipulate their claims of service to exact sexual reward; and knights are ensnared by women in chivalric romance.[113] Scholars, then, are beginning to create the kind of account that Gravdal was already calling for thirty years ago: a history of sexual assault that is 'less sensational, perhaps less appealing, but more complex'.[114]

By comparison, the study of active or affirmative consent, which explores the potential for sexual subjectivity and pleasurable outcomes, have yet to feature in extended historical work. 'Affirmative' appears here because it is the more readily recognised term in a modern context, referring to words or actions indicating agreement to a specific sexual act.[115] But my preferred term is 'active'. Even though ideas of passive and active cannot be seen as the basis for the normative framing of sexuality, Karras has demonstrated that both find expression in medieval contexts.[116] I am interested in shifting the binary to a spectrum where women could be sexually active, or actively sexual, without that necessarily being viewed as an aberration.

The starting points come from literary studies. In 1993 E. Jane Burns invited scholars to look again at French romance and *fabliaux* with new eyes. While we must recognise the misogynistic conditions of medieval literary discourse, we should also be alert to the ways in which women characters' attributed speech can be read as disruptive, creating a space for constructing a sexual subjectivity for women.[117] In *The English Romance in Time*, Helen Cooper identifies and

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[112] C. Harris, '"All the Strete My Voyce Shall Heare": Gender, Voice, and Desire in the Lyrics of Bodleian MS Ashmole 176', *Journal of the Early Book Society for the Study of Manuscripts and Printing History* 20 (2017), 29-58, at 42.
[113] See essays by S. M. Edwards, D. E. O'Sullivan, and D. Grubs in *Teaching Rape in the Medieval Literature Classroom*, ed. A. Gulley (Leeds, 2018).
[114] Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 1.
[115] For the possibilities and pitfalls of affirmative consent in a modern context, see J. Halley, 'The Move to Affirmative Consent', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42 (2016), 257-79; K. Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* (London, 2021).
[116] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 5-6.
[117] E. J. Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, 1993), 7.

rectifies a crucial presupposition of the historiography of early modern literature, that the work of William Shakespeare marked the advent of a new approach to female sexuality in which women's desiring could be construed as positive – beyond a dichotomy of the passive asexual or object of desire on the one hand, and on the other, the excessive and uncontrollable whore. Cooper backdates this positive sexuality into medieval literature using instances of active female desire in the romance genre. She explores texts where female desire is 'desirable': when appropriately directed, it becomes a 'driving force' in the narrative, ranked equally or even on occasion above male desire.[118] Cooper asserts that this tendency is almost unique to romances; only the lives of female saints, where active desire is directed towards Christ, come close. Neither of these genres, she concludes, 'offer[s] any revolutionary attack on conventional sexual morals', but rather represent women utilising such freedoms as they possess within the system of patriarchy.[119] Cooper's work as such offers a significant corrective to the view that medieval women were not imagined as desiring subjects. Further, women would have heard and engaged with these stories.

SOURCES

I make use of three main source groups, the threads of which are picked up and brought together at different points. The history of sexuality has been largely gleaned from sources of regulation: of what is illicit, unlawful, or deviant. My first source group is a broad range of imaginative and didactic material that reflects views we might understand as 'normative', in Kristeva's sense of comprising the dominant social code: confessionals and canon law; literature; medicine; and natural philosophy.[120] These sources portray women's sexuality in a negative light, but not as often as they are assumed to, and not always in the ways they are assumed to. Further, we cannot assume that this was always how they were received. There are few examples of medieval reactions to texts

[118] H. Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2004), 220; C. Stephen Jaeger points to similar attitudes in twelfth-century courtly epics, see his *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility* (Philadelphia, 1999), 184-197.
[119] Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 222.
[120] Kristeva, 'The System and the Speaking Subject', 31.

about sexuality. *La Querelle de la Rose* is the notable exception.[121] Medieval scholarly and popular debate over the meaning of the *Roman de la Rose* for its readers in the *Querelle* tradition, where writers of the late fourteenth-century onwards contributed their various responses to the original text, is so valuable precisely because it was produced in diverse milieux. The reactions within this debate tell us something of the variety of attitudes, both in terms of responses to sexual content, as well as the extent to which an extended literary discussion about women's sexuality was held to have a moral agenda – and then, what that moral agenda might be.[122]

I also look to judicial records to see what they can tell us about sex education, sex acts, space and place, and expectations. The main issue with the legal material for this project is that these sources only document where something, somewhere, has gone wrong. They do not seek to tell us about pleasure. Shannon McSheffrey recognises that sexual detail is often secondary or coincidental in a suit or complaint[123]. Martin Ingram similarly found that sexual reputation could be deployed as a pressure point in a larger suit.[124] I do not primarily look at these sources to understand authorities' attitudes to extra-marital relations, but rather for incidental detail – where did couples meet, where did they go, what did they do together, and what were the expectations? Finally, with all these considered, how did litigants construct narratives around extra-marital sex?

It is a highly fraught process to identify active consent to sex in judicial records. This is perhaps best represented by the protracted historiographical debate around abduction, but is also an issue for cases of fornication and adultery.[125] Depositions in these cases are not interested in motivation or the spirit in which sexual offences are committed. However, there is a source base which is

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121 K. Kong, 'Between Meretrix and Pute: The Polemical Uses of Gender in the *Querelle du Roman de la Rose*', *French Forum* 42:3 (2017), 341-354.
122 S. Huot, 'Medieval Readers of the "Roman de la Rose": The Evidence of Marginal Notations', *Romance Philology* 4:3 (1990), 400-420; P. Nykrog, 'Obscene or Not Obscene: n Lady Reason, Jean de Meun, and the Fisherman from Pont-sur-Seine, in *Obscenity, Social Control, & Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, 308-318.
123 S. McSheffrey, *Love and Marriage in Late Medieval London* (Kalamazoo, 1995).
124 Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, 74.
125 Dunn, *Stolen Women*, 98-9; C. Delameillieure, 'Partly With and Partly Against Her Will: Female Consent, Elopement, and Abduction in Late Medieval Brabant', *Journal of Family History* 42:4 (2017), 351-68.

highly invested in precisely the terms on which sexual consent is given – records of contested marriages. Juries in these cases were often trying to ascertain whether a voluntary act of the will had taken place through earnest exchange of marriage vows. Here, then, other motivators such as lust, pressure (whether by family, friends, or a partner), and financial gain were all brought to bear on the final outcome.

Perhaps the most important source group for what follows below are 'Women's Songs', song texts related to female sexuality. Literary sources are so valuable to historians of medieval sexuality because, in the absence of varied reflections of lived experience via diaries or letters that explicitly discuss sexual experiences, literature represents a range of sexualities, even if not in any simple or direct way. In some ways, though, this makes these sources even more useful, as they actively and self-consciously engage with audiences and expectations. There are over fifty 'Women's Songs' in more than thirty manuscripts to work with, and each of these has its own unique relationship with orality, written traditions, reading and copying, and performance. The complex manuscript context of each set of verses requires attention. They do not crop up in the same places, but in a vast variety of contexts. To divorce the texts from these contexts is to divorce them from the structures that defined how they would be read. The use of a bawdy couplet in a sermon holds a different set of meanings to songs copied in their entirety into a student's notebook.[126]

OUTLINE

My work shows that that sexuality was not the secret source of identity decoded by Foucault.[127] It could be public, confident, even politically charged. Comparing representations of female sexuality across the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries in a range of genres demonstrates that female pleasure

[126] These questions are considered at length in Chapter Three.
[127] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *passim*.

was perceived as central to reproductive sex, and so to the reproduction of the social order. Then as now, however, the world was not composed solely of married householders engaged in procreation. I will explore a further hypothesis, that the growth of songs about female pleasure relates to the social category of 'singlewomen' – unmarried, sexually active women. Singlewomen are not the sole subjects of this thesis, but they are a particularly interesting group through which to explore the ambivalences around women's sexuality.

Chapter One, 'Systematic Constraints: Ideas of Female Sexuality' is an exploration of how we might try to understand what was considered 'normative' in late medieval views of women's sexuality. It deals first with regulatory source material, and then how this material has been interpreted by historians, in order to demonstrate two levels of systematic constraint when dealing with women's sexuality. The resulting picture historians draw from the texts is compulsive sexual behaviour common to all women that drives them indiscriminately to seek out sexual encounters, licit or illicit. There is very little imaginative space for feminine sexual self-reflexivity. These medieval authors tap into a common set of stereotypes about women's sexuality – stereotypes that modern historians themselves treat as normative, even historians of women and gender (although this group signal disapproval of such attitudes). Either it is argued that female sexuality is inaccessible to modern eyes, or, just as painfully, medieval male commentary is treated as representing the consensus of an entirely misogynistic society. I present a series of textual challenges to the privileging of this view from within the very discourses we tend to label as oppressive.

The second chapter, 'Articulating Pleasure in Middle English', discusses my central source-group, Middle English 'Women's Songs' – lyrics and verse, written in the vernacular from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries, voiced by female figures. I first briefly consider their production and reception. Given that so few of the texts can be attributed with any certainty, we must instead pay attention to evidence of multiple authors, additions, reproductions, and consider the creative

work entailed in reception. Most importantly, the songs themselves have suffered from both over- and under-glossing, resulting in an underestimation of what they can tell us. This chapter therefore focuses almost entirely on the texts and their internal meaning. An attentive philological approach uncovers plentiful signifiers for sex acts and active female sexuality, so I engage in flexible close reading and provide new insights to how pleasure was expressed in Middle English. In doing so, I also challenge the invented category of the 'Women's laments', whose creation as category reflects and perpetuates a modern misread of a much more complex kind of text. I argue that 'Women's Songs' afforded a space in which to explore the scripts available to female sexual subjects. They teach young women what the social consequences of illicit encounters might entail, while emphasising the possibility of mutually pleasurable outcomes, and most crucially, they provide a language for this.[128]

Having evidenced that pleasure is a clear theme in 'Women's songs', I turn in Chapter Three to the manuscripts in which they are found. I consider their layout and demonstrate their authorship and readership as far as this can be determined. While singlewomen are a key group in the songs' representations of women, the social groups and genders that interacted with the manuscripts are far more varied. I synthesise existing scholarship and contribute further to the question of how we can argue for these texts having an oral tradition attached to them. The relationship between text and reader is a really complex one, and there were many readers, who are expecting different things from, and doing different things with, these texts.

Chapter Four seeks to answer the question, 'Where do women's songs fit in the social world of the fifteenth century?' First, I examine where singlewomen come into contact with sexual regulation, whether formal or informal, and situate their sexual activity in the households they inhabited, the labour they engaged in, and their social opportunities and spaces. I point to some

[128] J. Bennett, 'Ventriloquisms: When Maidens Speak in English Songs, c. 1300-1550', *Medieval Woman's Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, eds. A. Klinck and A. Rasmussen (Philadelphia, 2002), 187-204, at 190; Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 151.

of the practices and attitudes in lyric we can evidence elsewhere, as well as others that appear to have no other written authority. But I also show that we cannot argue for these lyrics being a reflection of their social world in any straightforward sense. Finally, I argue for the presence of women's sexual subjectivity in court records, by showing that they articulated sexual decision-making, awareness of their own preferences, and their emotional responses.

Experience, expression, knowledge, and power are interconnected – and in studying women's sexuality, the potential for both legal and literary sources to move quickly between misogyny and sexual subjectivity can be bewildering. But that these concepts appear together in the sources means that it is absolutely the historian who leads us to view the former as normative, and the latter as marginal and transgressive. We can make other choices.

CHAPTER ONE: SYSTEMATIC CONSTRAINTS: IDEAS OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

INTRODUCTION

In 1995, having already decided to attempt to 'demystify […] male discourse and find out what the position of women really was in the period', Georges Duby came to the conclusion that 'We have to accept that nothing of women appears except through male eyes'.[1] In 2017, Martin Ingram similarly found:

> In the records of court proceedings, as also the writings of moralists, legists, and theologians that underpinned them, the emphasis was on acts rather than intentions. So, while such sources tell us a great deal about the behaviour of men and women, questions of sexual identity remain elusive, while even issues of agency – especially *female* agency – are only partially open to investigation.[2]

Thus the 'unreachability' of female sexuality echoes through historians' pronouncements on the subject. Yet much of our medieval evidence, and much modern discussion of it, does not reflect how medieval society as a whole thought about women, but rather how part of a select male elite chose to portray women in particular circumstances.[3] Lyrics, satires, and didactic treatises frame women's sexuality not in terms of pleasure or choice, but rather of insatiable and obsessive need. These texts inform and mutually reinforce one another, and focussing on them in the search for female sexuality can have the effect of perpetuating the very oppressions forged in their writing.

The focus of the historiography on these texts can be explained by two main factors. The first is that the overwhelming majority of well-preserved and easily accessible textual evidence for the later Middle Ages seems to reflect these views. The medieval academy knows that it reproduces a canon of texts – most notoriously the literary works of Chaucer, but also a wider canon of

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[1] G. Duby, *The Knight the Lady and the Priest*, tr. B. Bray (London, 1984), xx; idem., *Women of the Twelfth Century*, trans. J. Birrel (2 vols., Cambridge, 1997-8), i, 3.
[2] Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, 30. Ingram's own emphasis.
[3] Scholars such as Amy Livingstone have pushed back against Duby's vision, for which see her *Out of Love for my Kin: Aristocratic Family Life in the Lands of the Loire, 1000-1200* (Ithaca, NY, 2012).

sermons, medical tracts, courtesy literature – and these in turn tend to dominate historians' reading. The second factor is the vitally important work of feminist scholarship over the past four decades that has uncovered the realities of a powerful cultural milieu in the Middle Ages that did not value women, their bodies, or their agency. I do not seek to undermine or read counter to the 'patriarchal equilibrium'.[4] Nonetheless, it stands to reason that the focus on oppression has shone more light on sources that are violent and misogynistic, than on those sources that tell us something of how women negotiated their position within this discourse. By pressing and focussing our attention on tensions within these sources, I aim to demonstrate that misogyny and oppression are not simply a given. They are structured and reproduced, but also challenged.

This chapter is divided into three parts. We shall begin with an overview of the normative texts for understanding some of these male late medieval views of women's sexuality. This inevitably involves treading some familiar ground, with the purpose of understanding how historians have arrived at the outlook we understand to be normal. Satirical poetry on the evils of women is perhaps the most well-known genre, so we will first examine the kinds of ideas these texts present about the nature of women's bodies, desires, and capacity to consent to sex. Alongside this, we consider the philosophical and physiological concepts that shaped literary texts. We will then move to the problems of viewing this material alongside the considerable body of texts dedicated to policing women's sexuality, particularly focussing on didactic literature and sermons. Liturgical drama, a public and widespread mode of retelling biblical stories and saints' lives, also deals with where and how women engaged in sexual misbehaviour. The aim of this section is to understand how perhaps more abstract or theoretical ideas were thought of as having a practical resonance or application. Didactic misogyny was not simply a way of talking; women likely heard and interacted with these genres. They formed part of women and men's educative messaging about sexuality, and both may well have internalised them to a greater or lesser extent.

[4] J. M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Manchester, 2006), 54.

As will become apparent, a dual message was sent, that women were simultaneously uncontrollable and responsible for protecting themselves from men.

In Part II, we turn from literature to civic and ecclesiastical efforts to control and categorize sexual misbehaviour, to ask whether the dual tensions that we find in didactic literature and sermons played out here too. The aim is to assess the extent to which these regulatory sources reveal a different set of pressures. While all women were subject to expectation and judgement based on sex-related behaviours, this burden lay all the more heavily on women who worked and lived outside of parental or spousal control, who were increasingly referred to as 'singlewomen' over the course of the fifteenth century. Singlewomen are not the sole subjects of this thesis, but they are a particularly interesting group through which to explore the ambivalences around women's sexuality. Further, singlewomen were increasingly associated with what I will call 'illicit sexuality'. I do not mean this in a pejorative sense. Rather, this term will act as shorthand for the range of sexual behaviours that were configured as unacceptable in normative discourse; that is, essentially, any sex act that occurred outside of the context of conjugality, whether premarital sex (where sex preceded a potential marriage), fornication (sex without the intention to marry, or ability to marry because one or both parties were in spiritual orders), or adultery (where one or both were married).

We shall see that singlewomen were made the target and focus of edicts and rumours of illicit sexuality; their presence was presented by urban authorities as being at once separate from and, in some senses, more disruptive than that of licensed sex workers. We can delineate some of the efforts made to bring singlewomen into a wider schema of regulating 'disorderly' persons. Their words, work, and movement through the world were brought to bear on their sexual reputations, with effect of setting a connection between women's financial and social independence, and illicit sexuality.

Having created an overall picture of what we think normative ideas looked like, we change pace to come at the question of normativity from a different angle in Part III. We go back to

misogynist discourse itself, especially in literary contexts. I work with an overlooked textual tradition which explores women's faithlessness to show that we can do more than reiterate the misogyny of the later medieval period. We can begin to show the ways in which apparently misogynist texts are more complex than they first appear. They are not intended to be read in isolation, and are even quite consciously placed in conversation with alternative views. I explore the possibility that they may be part of a more reflexive set of attitudes where misogyny is treated as problematic.

Building from this insight, I uncover some of the intersubjective problems in historians' application of normative ideas in textual analysis. Having found a hegemonic discourse, we might feel it is safe to treat this view as universal, and look for it in our reading strategies. But at times, the discourses we understand to have been dominant in the past have a tendency to merge with our assumptions as historians. Our analysis, then, can become a closed feedback loop, hearing only one voice – and then only listening for that voice. As a result, we may miss tensions present in the texts themselves. I will demonstrate the mechanics of this loop by analysing *Dame Sirith*, one text from the 'weeping bitch' tradition, which has been treated by scholars exclusively as a confirmation of medieval misogyny. In this tale, each plot development rotates on multiple, escalating expressions of coerced consent. I show the ways in which we as modern readers fail to separate ourselves from the medieval audience we purport to treat as distant, and then proceed to demonstrate the readings we have missed as a result of our complicity.

Finally, I look at texts that explicitly configure misogynistic characters as undesirable, unjust, or just plain unpleasant. The condemnation of sexually active singlewomen in liturgical drama presents us with highly public scripts for a range of responses to sexual misbehaviour where mercy and understanding is far superior to insult and punitive violence. Contemporary critique of public justice is another important strand in these plays, where the trial for the Virgin Mary's sexual misbehaviour is reimagined within a Consistory Court setting to explore the difficulties of correctly identifying and addressing sexual misdemeanour.

DOMINANT DISCOURSE

In a miscellany from the second quarter of the fourteenth century, a marginal scrap of verse in Middle English makes passing comment on the nature of women's sexuality:

> One cock sufyse xv hynnys
> Scarse xv men suffise one woman[5]
> [One cock suffices fifteen hens
> Scarcely fifteen men suffice one woman]

Similarly, in a poem advising against an old man marrying a younger woman, John Lydgate warns that all women are 'tikeltayll[s]', literally 'lascivious genitals', but more usually translated as 'loose women'.[6] They cannot be satisfied, and are therefore bound to be unfaithful:

> Unsatisfied a day in tymes twelf
> Whan twelve plowmen ered at the plowh[7]
>
> [Unsatisfied even with twelve times a day
> When twelve plowmen have laboured at the plow]

Lydgate graphically details women's sexual compulsions, characterizing their carnal appetite as 'the fevere of the crevil', or a burning itch.[8]

This sentiment of restless and unquenchable need that results in infidelity, especially in relation to younger wives with older husbands, can be found in countless iterations.[9] It seems likely that Lydgate's poem is a vernacular elaboration of Walter Map's *Letter of Valerius to Ruffinus, Against Marriage*, written c.1180. Map takes on the persona of the ancient Roman author Valerius Maximus advising his philosopher friend: 'There are no Lucretias, Penelopes or Sabine women now: beware of them all'. Lydgate's rhetoric further appears to make more explicit Map's subversion of the

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[5] London, British Library Arundel MS 220, fol. 1v.
[6] Literally, ticklish under the tail or genitals. J. Lydgate, 'Prohemy of a Mariage Betwixt an Olde Man and a Yonge Wife, and the Counsail (c. 1440- 60)', in *The Trials and Joys of Marriage*, ed. E. Salisbury (Kalamazoo, 2002), 103-119, l. 109
[7] Lydgate, 'Prohemy of a Mariage', ll. 122-3.
[8] Ibid., l. 125; Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies,* 199, finds that a play on 'crevice' may also be at work, identifies this definition from Medieval English Dictionary (hereafter MED), crevil n. from Middle Dutch crevele, 'an itch'. She further argues that a play on 'crevice' may also be at work.
[9] See, for example, 'Hogyn cam to bowers dore', in Oxford, Balliol College 354, fol. 506; DIMEV 2035; *Songs, Carols and other Miscellaneous Poems from the Balliol MS. 354 Richard Hill's Commonplace Book*, ed. R. Dyboski (London, 1908; repr. 1937). Also 'Lutel wot hit any man', in London, British Library Harley MS 2253, fol. 128r; DIMEV 3137.

twelve labours of Hercules.[10] This poetic tradition is but one instance of the widespread reception of Map's text. Besides its appearance in some sixty manuscripts, Chaucer's Wife of Bath references Valerius' *Letter* in her description of her husband Jankyn's 'book of wikked wyves'.[11] Liturgical drama also plays into this trope through the fears of Joseph, when he laments Mary's supposed infidelity as being the result of having taken too young a wife. In the *Towneley Plays*, a disparate manuscript collection of biblical plays from northern England, Joseph says of her pregnancy:

> Bot it is long of youthhede
> All sich wanton playes
> For yong women wyll nedys play them
> With yong men if old forsake them.[12]
>
> [It is because of youthfulness
> All such wanton games
> For young women will inevitably play them
> With young men if old forsake them.]

Here, Mary's unfaithfulness is portrayed as almost the inevitable result of her youth and his impotence; she is bound to seek out any and all young men who are capable of intercourse. The popular mid-thirteenth century Latin satire *Against Marrying*, found in fifty-five manuscripts, also explores the concern that women's sexual appetite is as indiscriminate as it is greedy:

> Idcirco mulier se multis subicit
> Et adhuc sitiens non dicit "Sufficit".[13]
>
> [For this reason, a woman submits herself to many
> And, still thirsty, never says "Enough".]

Lydgate similarly advises his friend that women's ravenous 'appetite' for male 'flesshe' must constantly 'be fed, as brid in the nest'.[14] The normative view of women's sexuality as presented in

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[10] 'she is determined to put her pleasure above everything. Hercules fulfilled twelve inhuman labours, but by the thirteenth […] he was consumed'. See W. Map, 'Letter of Valerius to Ruffinus, Against Marriage', in Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, 112.
[11] R. A. Pratt, 'Saint Jerome in Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves', *Criticism* 5:4 (1963), 316-22, at 316.
[12] *The Towneley Plays*, ed. G. P. J. Epp (Kalamazoo, 2018), ll. 146-149. See Epp's 'Introduction' for problems of dating and placing the manuscript.
[13] Anon., 'De Coniuge Non Ducenda', in *Gawain on Marriage: the De Coniuge Non Ducenda*, ed. and trans. A. G. Rigg (Toronto, 1986), 177-8. My translation.
[14] Lydgate, 'Prohemy of a Mariage', ll. 91; 392; 375.

literary texts is one of physiological imperative, combined with inability to control the female body's need for sex.

The Nature of Women's Sexuality

The philosophical grounding for women's greater lust is well known, and can be quickly summarised. Aristotelian scholasticism theorized that although men's bodies were hot and dry, and therefore might seem more inclined to lust than women's cold and wet humoral composition, this was in fact no contradiction. As famously argued by William of Conches (d. ca. 1154), 'it is harder to light a fire in wet wood, but it nonetheless burns longer and more intensely'.[15] Further, Galen's 'two-seed' theory of conception subtended the argument that women's coital pleasure was twofold, both emitting and receiving seed.

These strains of classical thinking were compounded in the medieval imagination by theological concepts of pollution. Dyan Elliot argues that treatises are far more concerned with male sexual sin because men had the ability to resist libidinous thoughts, while women were viewed as inescapably engaged in an 'essential complicity in the pursuit of sexual pleasure'. Women's reproductive systems were a token of original sin, and so their bodies were inherently 'self-polluting'. Hence, while women were potentially 'passive' in the heterosexual sex act, and so perhaps the less sinful, their very physiology was 'active', highly sexed, and beyond the capacity of control through will.[16]

There are implications to this discourse that go beyond simply setting up women as weaker and more prone to sexual sin. In the fifteenth-century didactic poem *Instructions to His Son*, the author Peter Idley warns that the loss of a woman's 'meydynhede', may render her unable to resist

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[15] D. Elliot, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1999), 37. Elliot's translation; While such scholarly debates are unlikely to have entered the wider consciousness of later medieval England, such texts as 'The Sekenesse of Wymmen' that appeared in fourteenth and fifteenth century manuscripts talked about women's ailments in terms of humoral imbalance. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 25.

[16] Elliot, *Fallen Bodies*, 35-6.

subsequent sexual encounters; 'For yff the woman onys in such werkes begynn/ Yt ys full hard to make hyr to leyffe' [Should the woman once begin such deeds/ It is very hard to make her stop].[17] We see this attitude too in the 'Tale of the Incestuous Daughter' which survives in several manuscript variations in a variety of contexts. In the moral tale, a father and daughter are both tempted by a fiend; she into tempting the father, and he into sexually abusing his daughter. She has three children as a result, all of whom she kills. When the father eventually confesses his sin and rejects the daughter, she kills both of her parents. But, so goes the logic, her sexual need has been awakened, and so the rest of the tale traces her aggressive and indiscriminate search for sexual partners. She opens a brothel and teaches other women how to be 'folys' [fools], where:

> Sche forsoke nether preste ne clerke
> Ne non that were breche ne shirt
> That wyth her wold dele.[18]
>
> [She refused neither priest nor clerk
> Nor any that wore breeches or a shirt
> That would have intercourse[19] with her.]

When she hears that a famous preacher will be passing through the town, she plans to attend so that she can 'som yong man fynd' [some young man find'.[20] She is thus presented as stuck in a voracious cycle that ends only with her death. Versions differ on whether she dies and priests pray for intercession on her behalf; or she confesses then immediately dies. Both iterations enable avoiding the question of whether she is capable of restraining herself once she has repented.

The belief that intercourse at too early an age causes excessive libido in a woman in later years dates at least to Aristotle's *Politics,* and received circulation within late medieval English intellectual culture in Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum*, and also in vernacular gynaecological

[17] Idley articulates this as a sexual 'truism' meant to illustrate the moral severity of sexually assaulting a virgin. See P. Idley, 'Instructions to His Son', in *Peter Idley's Instructions to His Son*, ed. C. D'Evelyn (London, 1935), 202, Bk. II.B, ll. 2649-55.
[18] Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61, fol. 66r.
[19] MED delen v. 6(b) To have intercourse with.
[20] MS Ashmole 61, fol. 66v.

texts.[21] According to this widespread misogynistic logic, women were entirely at the mercy of their bodily appetites once they were awakened by intercourse. In this model, any possibility of female sexual agency was foreclosed at the moment of the loss of virginity. And yet, as we shall see, women were expected to control their sexuality, and that of other women's. They were further seen as responsible for policing their movement through the world so as not to invite illicit sexual contact. Before we can consider the meaning of this conundrum, we must first look to what advice was available to women to help them in managing the contradictory expectation that their sexuality was uncontrollable, but that they should control it.

The Boundaries of Licit Behaviour: Didactic Literature

In this pervasively misogynist discursive landscape, female sexuality was not denied, but policed, via texts that women were expected to hear or read first-hand. Sermons and courtesy literature sought to mark out the uncertain terrain separating ostensibly innocent from illicit behaviours. Liturgical dramas are a little more complicated: they demonstrate some normative frameworks, which we will explore here; but they also tease apart some of the more problematic or contradictory implications of these frameworks. Part of the problem, as Kim Phillips has demonstrated, is that there was not in fact a hard-and-fast rule as to what was illicit, and what was licit sexual behaviour.[22] However, a specific set of contexts and actions emerge as either inviting or being tantamount to fornication.

Some social activities were presented in sermons as leading to sexual misbehaviour. *A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen*, a fifteenth-century prose Middle English version of the *Speculum Vitae*, lists the following 'synnes of werk' for both men and women:

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[21] Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 147; although see also Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 147-8, for Albertus Magnus' argument that prepubescent and pubescent girls imagine men's genitals and masturbate while fantasising about coitus, tautologically causing their own libidinousness and potentially inducing menstruation.

[22] Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 162.

> brekynge of holy dayes…ydel tales and japes, [caroling, daunsyng]…in kussynge with mouth, in clippynge, in tokenes makynge, in bekenynge, in wrastlynge…[23]
>
> [failing to keep holy days…idle tales and japes, [caroling, dancing]…in kissing with mouth, in embracing, in giving [love] tokens, in beckoning, in wrestling…]

These sins in 'deed', as opposed to imagination, do not amount to fornication, but comprise actions and activities that moralists thought could lead to illicit sex. The connection between wrestling and erotic play is also made in a sermon that quotes what appears to have been a popular song that the preacher had heard women singing:

> Atte wrastlinge mi lemman iches
> and atte ston kasting I him for les[24]
>
> [At wrestling, my lover I chose
> and at stone-casting[25] I dumped[26] him]

The sermon then goes on to warn against such games, and singing such songs. Dances and 'singings' are even more explicitly portrayed as sites of amorous play and coupling. To the Dominican friar John Bromyard, lovers who dance to songs are like pigs:

> *…ad modum porcarii qui, volens omnes porcos similiter congregare, facit unum clamare: sic dyabolus facit unam cantilenam incipere quam ipsemet dictavit…Ita spiritus malignus dictat cantilenas ad fatuos amores…*[27]
>
> […in the manner of a swineherd, who, wanting his pigs to come together, makes one of them make a noise: thus does the devil make one tired ditty to start off with, that he himself has composed…In this way the evil spirit composes hackneyed songs for stupid loves…]

The sermon cycle *Jacob's Well*, written c.1440, is clear that people only go to dances for one thing:

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[23] *A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen: A Prose Version of the Speculum Vitae, ed. from B.L. MS Harley 45*, ed. V. Nelson (Heidelberg, 1981), 126-7. Edition from London, British Library MS Harley 45, written in the first half of the fifteenth century, of which the first two owners were women: Margaret Brente, and Elyzabeth Pyckaring, both inscribed fol. 1.

[24] 'Atte wrastlinge mi lemman iches', Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.1.45 (43), fol. 41v; DIMEV 728; Robbins, *Secular* Lyrics, xxxix. The longer sermon context for this excerpt is discussed below, Chapter Three, 207.

[25] A popular stone-throwing contest, often played by young men. See N. Orme, *Medieval Children* (London, 2001), 331.

[26] MED forlesen v. 2(a) To desert or abandon (someone).

[27] J. Bromyard, '*Chorea*' [Dances], *Summa Predicantium*, cited in G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1933), 383, n. 3; my translation; see below, 52, for the gendered implications of pigs.

> ȝif þou vse to go to dau[n]ses…for to stire þi-self or oþere to synne of leccherye, þou synnest dedly. And ȝif þou vsyst it ofte, bot it be noȝt for þat entent because oþere may be steryd þ[er]by to synne, þou dost dedly synne.[28]
>
> [If you are accustomed to go to dances…in order to bestir yourself or others to the sin of lechery, you commit a deadly sin. And if you are often accustomed to it [going to dances], even if it is not for that intent, because others may be bestirred thereby, you do a deadly sin.]

There is an implicit direction of causation here. Through dancing, women both lack sexual control in themselves, and are responsible for causing sexual sin in others. In 1387, William Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, relayed not dissimilar fears in another context; he recorded that the women servants of nuns engaged in 'chattering, *cantelenas* and other light behaviour' that distracted the nuns from their regular services.[29]

This is reinforced in courtesy literature. In *How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Doughter*, a fourteenth-century instructive work, a woman who goes to a wrestling or shooting game is 'a strumpet other a gyglote' [a strumpet, or else a whore].[30] In the poem *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage* (c. 1460-70), another mother instructs her daughter to take care not to appear available for sex when attending dances, singings, or games:

> Doȝttur, in all company
> vppon þe hally day,
> Wheþer þou wylt daunce or synge,
> or witt thy fellowys pley,
> Honge thy gordoll nott to lowe[31]
>
> [Daughter, in all company
> upon the holy day,
> Whether you will dance or sing,
> or with your fellows play,
> Hang your girdle not too low]

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[28] *Jacob's Well: An Englisht Treatise on the Cleansing of Man's Conscience; Edited from the Unique MS. About 1440 A.D. in Salisbury Cathedral*, ed. A. Brandeis (London, 1900), 165.
[29] Oxford, New College, 'Register of William of Wykeham Bishop of Winchester, 1386-7', cited and translated in E. Power, *Medieval English Nunneries, c.1275 to 1535* (Cambridge, 1922), 157.
[30] 'How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Doughter', *The Trials and Joys of Marriage*, ed. E. Salisbury (Kalamazoo, 2002), 219-224, ll. 73-5.
[31] 'The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage', *Queene Elizabethes Achademy, etc.*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London, 1869), 40, ll. 37-41.

This poem does not strictly prohibit participating in songs and dances, but cautions young women to moderate their physical appearance in these contexts by not allowing their girdle or belt to slip. This could also be read as a more general injunction not to forget themselves during playful activities, in case a man assumed that this indicated sexual availability.

Certain spaces are likewise treated as particularly prone to creating opportunities for sexual misbehaviour, and social messaging told women that appearing in these spaces indicated their sexual availability. It is clear that this messaging reached, and was internalised by, women: Margery Kempe speaks to the inherent vulnerability of women out of doors.[32] As a woman travelling alone and therefore without a self-evident marital status, she fears sexual assault and stresses the comparable safety she feels when she is accompanied from Constance to Bologna by William Weaver.[33] As an old woman, on her way back home through continental Europe, her fears peak at night:

> Sche durst trustyn no man; whedir sche had cawse er non, sche was euyr a-ferd. Sche durst ful euyl slepyn nyth, for sche wend men wolde a defylyd hir. Þerfor sche went to bedde gladlich no nyth led þan sche had a woman er tweyn with hir.
>
> [She dared trust in no man; whether she had cause or not, she was always afraid. She greatly dreaded sleep at night, for she knew men would have defiled her. Therefore she went to bed gladly no night unless she had a woman or two with her.]

Margery's travels were exceptional; but anecdotal evidence demonstrates that her fears were shared by other women on the road, and these women similarly turned to safety in numbers in response.[34] Women's safety from sexual violence while travelling, it seems, was provisional on explicit communal protection, whether by a man or a group of women – and women themselves were acutely aware of this.

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[32] On the authorial voice of 'The Booke of Margery Kempe', see L. Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, Pa., 1994); also K. Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and the Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia, 1991).

[33] *The Booke of Margery Kempe*, ed. S. B. Meech (London, 1940), 65. In the case of her detainment by the Steward of Leicester, however, her pleas to spare her because she is married do not stop the man from attempting an advance. See *The Booke of Margery Kempe*, 113.

[34] P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy* (New York, 1992), 300.

Prescriptive texts, however, look more locally, at public and social spaces. They tend to be concerned with policing women's movement, shifting the burden of avoiding sexual contact, whether consensual or non-consensual, onto women as they move through space. The thirteenth-century *A lutel soþ sermun* warns women of the places where they can expect to slip into illicit behaviours:

> Robyn[35] wule Gilothe,[36]
> leden to þan ale.
> And sitten þer to-gederes,
> and tellen heore tale.
> He may quyten hire ale,
> and seoþþe don þat gome.
> An eue to go myd him,
> ne þincheþ hire no schome.
> Hire syre [and] hire dame,
> þreteþ hire to bete.
> Nule heo fur-go Robyn,
> for al heore þrete.
> Eu[er] heo wule hire skere,
> ne com hire no mon neyh.
> Forte þat hire wombe,
> vp aryse an heyh.[37]
>
> [Robin will Gilot,
> lead to the ale.
> And sit there together,
> and tell her tales.
> He may pay for her ale,
> and after they have done that game.
> That night [she will] go with him,
> she never thinks of any shame.
> Her master and her mistress,
> threaten to beat her.
> She has no desire to give up Robin,
> for all their threats.
> Ever she[38] will her innocence claim,

[35] MED Robin n. 1(a) designation for a robber, vagabond, or lowly person.
[36] MED gigelot n. 1(a) A loose woman; a courtesan, harlot.
[37] Oxford, Jesus College 29, Part 2, f. 258.
[38] MED he pron. (2) 1(a) As anaphoric or pers. pron., subject: (a) the female person referred to, she.

nor will she come near any man.[39]
Until after[40] her womb,
Rises up.]

The ale house, then, was a site of problematic sexual contact. Ian Forrest has further pointed out that women who worked in these spaces were also viewed as sexually suspect, where reports of fornication might be accompanied by describing the offending woman's occupation as a tapster.[41] *How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Doughter* develops the idea of relational space, beyond simply places that are associated with disreputable behaviour. In this text, readers are told to refrain from accompanying a suitor to any private space where they might be led astray:

For any thing that may befawle,
Syt not by hym, ne stand thou nought
Yn sych place ther synne mey be wroght.[42]

[For anything that may befall,
Sit not by him, nor stand you not
In such places where sin may be committed.]

This establishes a woman's responsibility to conduct courtship under surveillance, within public spaces, and to make certain that she is never found alone by, or with, a man.[43]

The Digby *Mary Magdalene* play, which was circulating in East Anglia around 1480-1530, demonstrates how a seduction can escalate between spaces and activities. Mary meets a married 'gallant' named Curiosity in a tavern, and invites him to drink with her. Curiosity mistakes her naivety for sexual invitation, suggesting that her presence in the tavern and her willingness to speak signals availability. Indeed, as in the cases noted by Forrest, Curiosity has already suggested that he is looking for 'sum praty tasppysstere' [some pretty/wanton tapster] that he would 'fayn

[39] Neil Cartlidge here reads 'for all her threats, she still wants to be free. Now no man comes near her, because her stomach has swollen up'. This translation relies on 'forte', and 'skere' (v. skeren, to keep oneself free of blame). It is possible to read 'ne com hire no mon neyh' both ways, where Gilot may be the object of men's rejection, or a subject who chooses to forgo men's company. See N. Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300* (Cambridge, 1997), 166, n. 32.
[40] MED forto conj. 1(a) Up to the time that, until; al ~; (b) ~ that; (c) ~after (efsones) that, until after.
[41] I. Forrest, *Trustworthy Men: How Inequality and Faith Made the Medieval Church* (Princeton, 2018), 232.
[42] 'How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Doughter', ll. 30-32.
[43] B. Hanawalt, *Of Good and Ill Repute: gender and social control in medieval England* (Oxford, 1998), 74.

rownde' [gladly speak to privately].[44] Mary initially refutes her apparent availability, asking 'wene ye that I were a kelle?' [do you think that I am a loose woman?].[45] But drinking turns to dancing, then the gallant asks her to walk with him to 'another stede' [another place], where we are given to understand that she has sex with him.[46] The shift to a private space is what enables sexual misbehaviour, although the seduction begins in the tavern with speaking, drinking, and dancing.

This implies a certain deniability in public spaces, or at least the possibility of retreating. Yet in the courtesy poem *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage*, even surveillance in a street has the potential to become an instrument of sexual shaming:

> And rene þou not fro hous to house
> layke a nantyny gryce;
> For þe yoge men cheres the,
> they wyll sey þou art nyce,
> And euery boy wyll wex bold
> to stere þe to lovd wysse.[47]
>
> [And run you not from house to house
> like a St Anthony pig;
> For the young men cheer[48] you,
> they will say you are lascivious[49] [lit. nice]
> And every boy will grow bold
> to steer you to lewd vice.]

The specific injunction here is not to go from house to house gossiping. But as Jeremy Goldberg has shown, the text draws on the common ideological association between promiscuous women out of doors and pigs that wandered the streets.[50] The danger which the text alerted its audience to was that even in a public space, in the daytime, talking to friends in the street, a woman's

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[44] *Digby Magdalen Play*, l. 495.
[45] Ibid., l. 527.
[46] Ibid., l. 542.
[47] 'The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage', 39, ll. 15-20; *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, ed. M. Y. Offord (Oxford, 1971), 87, ll. 18-20, gives similar advice.
[48] As in, cheer you on, or encourage.
[49] MED nice n. 1(b) a lascivious or dissolute person.
[50] P. J. P. Goldberg, 'Women', in *Fifteenth Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. R. Horrox (Cambridge, 1994), 112-31, at 117; idem, 'Pigs and Prostitutes: Street Walking in Comparative Perspective', in *Young Medieval Women*, eds. K. J. Lewis et al (New York, 1999), 172-193; The comparison is also made in *Jacob's Well*, 159, l. 30.

reputation was under constant threat. Alerting men to your sexual availability could be as simple as stepping outside of your front door.

There is a strong association in sermons between women wandering, and the loss of their virginity. Jacob and Jephthah's daughters are held up as warnings of the mortal dangers of being seen out of doors. Dinah, daughter of Jacob and Leah was raped by Shechem while visiting Shechemite women (Genesis 34.1-2). Meanwhile, Jephthah promised to sacrifice whatever came out of his house first as a burnt offering, if God would give him victory in battle. On his return, his daughter came out to meet him dancing with a tambourine, and so made herself the sacrifice. She agreed to this fate on the condition that she might go into the mountains with her friend for two months to weep because she would never be married (Judges 11). One sermon is worth quoting at length:

> As Dyna, Jacobes douȝter, that walkede out of her ynne to se women of the contre that sche wonede ynne, and was yravesched and enforced and lost here maydenhode. Nyce maydenhode is ylyckened to Jeptes douȝter, that walkede aboute in the monteynes twey monthes for to wepe her maydenhode. So doth nyce maydenes that walketh aboute in medes and in fayre places ledynge daunces and syngynge, as it were schewynge hem self to lese her meydenhode, and makynge sorwe that they have ybe so longe maydenes. ffor it byfalleth to maydenes to be in stilnesse and in cloos, as oure lady seynte Marie was whenne the angel come to hure and fonde hure in a pryvy chambre and nouȝt stondyng ne walkynge by stretys…This meydenhode is as the erthe with-oute corne, other a lampe with-oute oyle, a pors withoute selver, a note with-oute curnel, a tonne wth-oute wyne, an yȝe with-out syȝt, a body with-out soule.[51]
>
> [Like Dinah, Jacob's daughter, that walked out of her close to see women of the country that she wandered in, and was ravished and forced, and lost her maidenhood. Wanton maidenhood can be likened to Jephthah's daughter, that walked about in the mountains two months to mourn her maidenhood. So too, do wanton maidens that walk about in meadows and fair places leading dances and singing, as it were publicly displaying themselves to lose their maidenhood, and making laments that they have been so long maidens; for it befalls to maidens to be still, and in their close, as our Saint Mary was when the angel came to her and found her in a private chamber, and not standing or walking in the streets….This maidenhood is like the earth without grain, or a lamp without oil; a purse without silver; a nut without kernel; a cask without wine; an eye without sight; a body without soul.]

[51] London, British Library Harley MS 2398, fol. 39b; see also *The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. S. J. H. Herrtage (London, 1879), 70.

There is no suggestion in Judges 11 that Jephthah's daughter is deliberately making herself available for losing her virginity, or that she is specifically lamenting that she has been a maiden for so long. Indeed, it is quite clear that her loss is that she will never be married, and she returns to be sacrificed still a virgin. The preacher here uses one element of the story – that she came out of the house singing and dancing – to speak to contemporary concerns about women who come to public places to sing and dance with the explicit aim of engaging in sex.

What you did, where you were seen, and who you were seen with – these taken together comprised a set of identifiable sex-related behaviours, regardless of whether fornication or adultery could be demonstrated. The policing of female sexuality was not only a matter of space and activity, however. As we shall see in a moment, it was also a matter of the senses. But before we leave this preacher, let us notice another feature of his sermon – the notion of 'nyce maydenes', with its implication that virginity was not simply a physical matter, but a social one. 'Nyce' can be understood as foolish but in this context may be more accurately translated as 'wanton'. The preacher says a woman who has not had sex but goes abroad as if she wanted it amounted to a 'body without soul' – she may have not (yet) have lost her virginity, but she has none of the value, goodness, or even appearance of a virgin.

For some commentators, refraining from illicit intercourse alone did not qualify women for 'true' virginity. In *Trustworthy Men*, Ian Forrest finds that women who gained a reputation for promiscuity 'could find that they were deemed unruly in other areas of life'.[52] This is certainly true – but reputation also worked in the opposite direction. A woman who was viewed as unruly could find herself deemed sexually active, or as good as, and therefore sexually available.

[52] Forrest, *Trustworthy Men*, 79.

By Sight and Sound

Beyond spaces and activities, a further strain of discourse concerned how bodies might betray their sexual laxity, in ways detectable with the senses, as the allegorical figure *Confessio* relates in one morality play:

> Wyth eyne sen, herys herynge,
> Nose smellyd, mowthe spekynge,
> And al thi bodys bad werkynge,
> Vicium quodcumque fecisti.[53]
>
> [With eyes seen, ears hearing,
> Nose smelled, mouth speaking,
> And all your body's wicked deeds,
> Whatsoever sins you have committed.]

This sensory advice was directed at all sins and sinners. But didactic texts did make use of the senses with particular reference to women, and especially of gaze and speech to structure how women's sexual sins might be both enacted and detected.[54]

In *Venomous Tongues*, Bardsley suggests that women's sexual status was judged on the basis of their 'verbal chastity'.[55] This required restraint of the mouth as well as the genitals (or perhaps, even more so). For John Mirk (c.1400), a 'a mayden ys lytyll worþe þat…ys a claterer, a janguler, a flyter, a curser, a swerer, and a skold of her mowþe' [a maiden is of little worth who…is a chatterer, a gossip, a wrangler, a curser, a swearer, and a scold of her mouth].[56] In English texts for parish priests, words about sex acts or words that encouraged sex acts were the moral equivalent of a sex act.[57] Lecherous language, then, was not simply a sin of the mouth – it could be evidence of, or

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[53] *The Castle of Perseverance*, ed. D. N. Klausner (Kalamazoo, 2010), ll. 1516-1519.
[54] For sins that can be by 'Nose smellyd', see below, 82-3; This study does not consider establishing maidenhood through touch; Bronach Kane has pointed to a potential avenue of enquiry regarding the palpation of women's breasts. This is not to establish pregnancy or having given birth, but borne of a theory that once women are sexually active, lumps indicating corrupted flesh are detectable by touch. These are likely lymph nodes, which are in all breasts regardless of gender. See B. Kane, 'Impotence and Virginity in the Late Medieval Ecclesiastical Court of York', *Borthwick Papers* 114 (2008), 1-37, at 27-9.
[55] Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues*, 125-6.
[56] J. Mirk, *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies*, ed. T. Erber (London, 1905), 229, ll. 31-4.
[57] For the biblical authority on this, see Matthew 5:27-8; R. M. Karras, '*Leccherous Songys*: Medieval Sexuality in Word and Deed', in *Obscenity, Social Control, & Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, ed. J. M. Ziolkowski (Leiden, 1998), 232-245, at 234.

even constitutive of, sexual sin. In the fourteenth-century Midlands *Book of Vices and Virtues*, the path for both men and women from furtive gaze, to foul speech, to fornication was a clear one:

> And in þis synne tempteþ þe deuel a man in fyue maneres, as seyynt Gregory seiþ. First in folily lokes. And after in foule wordes. And after in foule touchynges. And after in foule kissynges. And after comeþ a man to do þe dede.[58]
>
> [And in this sin the devil tempts a man in five manners, as Saint Gregory says. First in flirtatious looks. And after in foul words. And after in foul touching. And after in foul kissing. And after a man comes to do the deed.]

The suggestion here is that 'foul' speech tempts men to sin, rather than being itself a method of temptation by men. A five-line catch used in at least two sermons connected acts associated with sex to the ways women might gaze and express themselves:

> Liþer lok and tuingling
> Tiheng and tikeling
> Opin brest & singing
> Þeise mid outin lesing arin toknes of horelyng[59]
>
> [Wicked looks and winks
> Giggling and tickling
> Unchecked/brazen emotions [lit. breast] and singing
> These, with no word of a lie, are the tokens of a fornicator]

The *Fasciculus morum* similarly refers to *visus* [sight] as the first occasion of lust, where disorderly looking is sinful not only because it tempts towards fornication, but because it has the capacity to satisfy or bring pleasure in and of itself.[60] Further, eyes cannot refrain from seeing, and so from sinning; this unruliness is particularly potent when combined with women's apparent insatiability.[61] To indulge in *colloquiis impudis* [unchaste conversation] is the second occasion of lust. The writer gives examples from Proverbs of women's flattery and persuasion tempting men into sin.[62] Words,

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[58] *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. F. W. Nelson (London, 1942), 43.
[59] Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.1.45, fol. 24; London, British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra C.VI, fol. 22v; DIMEV 3131; Winks also appear as a sign of promiscuity in 'The Trial of Mary and Joseph', *The N-Town Plays*, ed. D. Sugano (Kalamazoo, 2007), l. 32, where 'Tyffany Twynkelere' is called to court to answer for her misbehaviour.
[60] *Fasciculus Morum*, 649-53.
[61] For one potential response to the unavoidability of seeing, C. A. Jones, '"To Embrace a Sack of Excrement": Odo of Cluny and the History of an Image', *Speculum* 96/3 (2021), 662-98.
[62] *Fasciculus Morum*, 654-66.

filthy or not, are thus connected to women's speech in particular, which operates as a form of sexual immodesty.

Jacob's Well shows that lechery does not require any outward sign, but manifestations do include gaze and words:

> in herte, in thouȝt, in desire, in wyl, in consent, in eyȝe, in syȝt, in mowth, in woordys, in kyssinges, in towchynges, in halsynges, in helping oþere, or in counseylyng oþere in conforting oþere þerto.[63]
>
> [in heart, in thought, in desire, in will, in consent, in eye, in sight, in mouth, in words, in kissing, in touching, in fondling, in helping others, or in counselling others in comforting others thereto.]

It further gestures towards specific contexts and kinds of words: both speakers and hearers should avoid 'leaccherous woordys', 'leccherous songys of loue paramour', and 'rubaudye', among other forms of harmful speech.[64] Lechery through speech did not necessarily need to be combined with lecherous actions: an exemplum in *Hanndlyng Synne* demonstrates the dangers of obscene words alone, with an emphasis on words as incitement to sin. It describes a nun who was continent, and never acted on her desires, but 'spake ever vyleynly' [spoke ever shamefully].[65] This could be taken as her speaking obscenely, or perhaps telling ribald tales. One night she is cleaved in two by demons, who find that only half of her is worthy of salvation. Her fellows find the remaining half the following day, and conclude: 'See how here tunggë made here slayn/ And foulë wurdes broght here to payn' [See how her tongue caused her to be slain/ And foul words brought her to pain].[66] Like Jephthah's daughter, it appears that here too continence was not sufficient to gain the heavenly rewards of sworn virginity.

Slippage between words and deeds also found expression in advice literature. We have already seen the young gossip of *The Good Wyfe Wolde a Pylgremage*, whose talking in the street is

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[63] *Jacob's Well*, 164.
[64] *Jacob's Well*, 164, ll. 3-5, 217, 27.
[65] R. Mannyng, *Robert of Brune's "Handlyng Synne": Written A.D. 1303, with the French Treatise on Which it is Founded, Le Manuel de Penchiez, by William of Wadington*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London, 1862), 56, l. 1549.
[66] Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, 57, ll. 1591-2.

interpreted as sexual availability; she is also warned to 'temper well' her tongue.[67] William Caxton's 1484 translation of the *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour*, or the *Book of the Knight of the Tower*, survives in six extant copies, but the text was copied many more times and was widely known by the end of the fifteenth century.[68] It is, for the most part, a collection of moral tales about social conduct ostensibly aimed at women. Around half are drawn from biblical examples, but many others are presented as personal anecdotes. The original book was written from 1372 onwards by the fourth Geoffrey de la Tour-Laundry and clerics in his household for the instruction of his daughters.[69] Caxton's audience was broader: in his introduction, he calls for 'al yong gentyl wymen' [all young gentlewomen] to learn by its examples.[70] What evidence can be gleaned from the extant copies suggests a broader readership of both noble families and London's civic and mercantile elite (a world we explore in Chapter Three).[71]

The *Knight of the Tower* connects an over-loose tongue with the suggestion of sexual laxity. He tells of a 'damoysell douȝter' [unmarried daughter] playing backgammon with a knight.[72] She accuses him of weighting the dice. The argument intensifies; he lands the finishing blow:

> he said yf she had ben wyse and good/ she should not come by nyght un to the mennes chambres/ and kysse them and embrace them without Candell/ And she supposed well to have auenged her/ and sayd to hym that he lyed/ And he said he dyde not/ and that suche one & suche one had sene it.[73]
>
> [He said if she was wise and good, she should not come by night into the men's chambers, and kiss them and embrace them without a candle. And she thought to avenge herself, and said to him that he lied. And he said he did not, and that this one and that had seen it.]

Part one of the lesson is not to get embroiled in fights with men who will stoop to sexual slurs. But there is a coda:

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[67] 'The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage', 39, ll. 15-20, 85.
[68] The first extant English translation was written during the reign of Henry VI; For the transmission of both the French and English versions in England, see R. Barnhouse, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower: manners for young medieval women* (New York, 2006), xviii-xxiii.
[69] *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, xxxviii.
[70] Ibid., 3, l. 7.
[71] *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, 12-13; see below, Chapter Three, 217.
[72] *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, 30, l. 1.
[73] *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, 30, ll. 16-20.

> And there was moche peple/ that herd hit/ whiche knewe no thing therof to fore/ And many of them sayd/ that a good stylle/ and not so to haue chyden had ben better for her & that she was beten with her owne staf/ that is to saye by her tonge/ and by hir hasty spekyng […] And thus was she shamed by the haultnesse of her herte.[74]
>
> [And there were many people that heard it, that knew nothing of this before. And many of them said that she ought to have been quiet, and not to have chided so would have been better for her and that she was beaten with her own staff, that is to say by her own tongue and by her hasty speaking […] And thus she was shamed by the haughtiness of her heart.]

Far from a simple connection of equating a loose tongue with loose morals, the suggestion here is that, regardless of the truth or knowledge of the circumstances, people are more likely to accept a charge of promiscuity against a woman who is argumentative, and moreover that the loss of reputation is her own fault.

John Mirk remarks in his *Festial* that 'hyt ys an old Englysch saw: A mayde schuld be seen, but not herd' [It is an old English saying: a maid should be seen, but not heard].[75] But we can understand from the texts explored thus far that to be seen or heard was a potential sign of promiscuity. Women were meant to police themselves by removing themselves utterly from any situation in which sex could become a possibility, whether through thought or speech, gesture or action – even to the point of silence and self-isolation. Moreover, at the moment where a man deemed a woman to be available for sex, her status as a maiden was – tautologically – brought into doubt.[76] Women who behaved in a sexually available way forfeited their title to virginity. This was not even about simply exonerating men - rather, women were demonised in their own right. The question of whether a woman had already transgressed was determined by men, even while transferring responsibility for that (or any future) transgression to women themselves. This is the closest didactic literature came to the admission that protection of a woman's self and reputation was only ever minimally within her own power. Virginity was about more than being sexually

[74] Ibid., ll. 20-30
[75] *Mirk's Festial*, 230, ll. 1-2.
[76] It might also be borne in mind what effect the importance of verbal chastity to social virginity might have on women in situations of sexual assault. How does one raise the hue and cry, when one's entire social conditioning points to silent forbearance?

inactive, or not acting in sexually charged ways. It was as much about speaking and avoiding gaze in a way that a virgin should.

STRUCTURING WOMEN'S SEXUAL MISBEHAVIOUR

In the texts explored thus far, although many appear to talk quite generally about women, discourses aiming to control women's sexuality were not universally applied to an essential 'woman'. Rather, the level of scrutiny was dependent on the social differences and class position of the individual.[77] In particular, young, unmarried women working outside of or away from their natal home were a focal point. The women who were presumed to frequent taverns and dances, and gossip in the street were 'singlewomen': unmarried women, located in towns, and with wages to spend. I therefore turn now to address texts that identify singlewomen specifically as a group that carried implications of illicit sexuality. In *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, Ruth Mazo Karras argues that 'there was no conceptual space in the medieval church's scheme of things for a sexually active single woman who was not a sex worker'.[78] Karras is concerned here with concepts, but legal practice shows us that this was not the reality. Prescriptive sources, both ecclesiastical and secular, offer us insight into how singlewomen were categorised as peculiarly liable to sexual offences, but show that they were conceptualised in ways that render them distinct from sex workers.

SINGLEWOMEN IN URBAN ORDINANCES AND COURTS

The legal category of 'singlewomen' seldom appears in legal records before the fifteenth century. Cordelia Beattie has identified the 1413 Statute of Additions as something of a watershed, after which categorisation by status in legal documents became common practice. Hence we see a proliferation in the use of 'knight' or 'gentleman' as a legal addition or personal designation – but

[77] R. M. Karras, 'Because the Other is a Poor Woman She Shall Be Called His Wench: Gender, Sexuality, and Social Status in Late Medieval England', in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, eds. S. Farmer and C. Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis, 2003), 210-229, at 211.
[78] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 156; eadem., 'Sex and the *Singlewoman*', in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, eds. J. M. Bennett and A. Froide (Philadelphia, 1998), 127-145.

also 'singlewoman', albeit more gradually.[79] This was an economic status, denoting women who had financial independence away from the natal or spousal home. Indeed, Beattie has demonstrated that the use of 'singlewoman' in tax documents cannot be read across to denote a sexual status. Any women who were financially independent, most commonly widows, could be conflated with singlewomen.[80] A designation on a bureaucratic document cannot be taken for granted, but does reveal the kinds of constructs available to the creators of these records. The naming of 'singlewomen', Beattie ultimately concludes, is a result of increasing use of Middle English as opposed to any historically-particular concern with women's sexuality or economic liability.[81]

Beattie's important findings do not, however, tell us about the social implications of a new designation for women over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that was still being solidified.[82] The term was also value-laden, and as such created new problems for civic authorities as they attempted to grasp what exactly was implied by it. The surviving act books of municipalities are patchy in coverage, and there are rarely multiple examples from single localities to make comparisons over time with any clarity, but we can see that in a variety of urban centres there were attempts to engage with new terminology in order to create restrictions on women who were thought to be potentially disruptive to order by their sexual laxity.

Jeremy Goldberg argues that, over the fifteenth century, women became increasingly marginalised within the labour force. Singlewomen were 'ghettoized' into an economy characterised by petty trade, retailing ale, prostitution, and crime that reinforced magisterial perceptions about ungoverned women posing a direct threat to social order.[83] This is the context

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[79] Beattie, *Medieval Single Women*, 124-5; *Statutes of the Realm*, eds. A. Luders et al (12 vols., London, 1810-1828), ii, 171.
[80] Beattie, *Medieval Single Women*, 125-7.
[81] Ibid, 147.
[82] K. L. French, 'Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England. By Cordelia Beattie.', *Cultural and Social History* 6:2 (2009), 238-240, at 240.
[83] See Goldberg, 'Migration, Youth and Gender', 98; also his 'Coventry's "Lollard" Programme of 1492 and the Making of Utopia', *Pragmatic Utopias: Ideals and Communities, 1200-1630*, eds. R. Horrox and S. Rees Jones (Cambridge, 2001), 97-116, at 98.

in which civic authorities began to impose restrictions on 'singlewomen' living within city walls. In early instances, for example the mid-fifteenth-century customary of the Southwark Stews, 'single women' clearly refers to women engaged in sex work within brothels:

> First…we ordeyne and make accordyng to the seid olde custumes conteyned in the custumery, that ther be no stewe holder nor his wife let not no single woman to go and come atte alle tymes whan thei list…[84]
>
> [First…we ordain and make according to the said old customs contained in the customary, that no brothel-keeper nor his wife allow any single woman to come and go at any time that they like…]

The concerns highlighted within this custumal largely centre on women openly wandering to procure customers, but there is also reference to ensuring that single women who wish to 'leve her synne and never come there no more' are not kept within brothels against their will.[85] These were to receive support in leaving the lordship in which they were found. There was some flexibility here, then, in moving between sexual statuses.

In York over the course of the 1480s, there was a concerted effort to remove women who were suspected of living by their bodies or other sex-related offences from the centre of the town. Thus in 1482 the council ordered that 'common women and the other misgoverned women' were to live in the suburbs, and not within the city walls.[86] If there was any formal distinction between 'common' and 'misgoverned', it was not clear to the neighbours of Marjorie Gray, alias 'Cherilippis' [Cherrylips], as they twice appeared before the mayor in 1483 to complain that Marjorie was 'a woman ill disposd of hyr body to whom ill dispossid men resortys, to the newsaunce of the neghbburs' [a woman ill-disposed of her body, to whom ill-disposed men resort, to the nuisance of the neighbours].[87] A further ordinance from 1486 retains the ambiguity rather than clarifying:

> Moreover it is ordigned that the seriaunt to the masez shall se all the stretes clensid bifore Sonday next commyng. And that they shall forthwith commaunde…of evere parissh to

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[84] J. B. Post, 'A Fifteenth-Century Customary of the Southwark Stews', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 5:7 (1977), 418-428, at 422.
[85] Ibid., 423.
[86] *York House Books 1461-1490*, ed. L. C. Attreed (2 vols., Stroud, 1991), i, 261.
[87] *York House Books 1461-1490*, ii, 708.

> yeve warnyng to all opyn boldes…and common chiders and othre misruled people to avode evere parish out of the citie to the utter partes of the suburbs…[88]
>
> [Moreover it is ordained that the serjeant-at-mace shall see all the streets cleansed before Sunday next coming. And that they shall forthwith command…of every parish to give warning to all open bolds [i.e. sex workers or bawds]…and common chiders and other misruled people to leave every parish in the city to the furthest parts of the suburbs…]

Perhaps in York at least, it was expedient to leave categories open to interpretation so that any woman who was viewed as being sexually suspect could be removed from the city.[89]

The testimonies of neighbours could equally prove or disprove ill repute. In the diocese of Lincoln in 1519, some parishioners of Thornton (Lincolnshire) said that they suspected nothing evil about their rector's situation, living with his servant, Joan Thakham (though they conceded that she had a sharp tongue). Other villagers however described Joan as a scold and a whore who lived incontinently with the rector and ran a tavern out of the rectory.[90] Parishioners who sought to prove the couple's guilt turned to Joan's social behaviours, all of which were recognised as sex-related. What emerges from these cases is that a woman's reputation among her neighbours could be the deciding factor in whether a relationship was suspect or not.

About the same time that York was ejecting women specifically associated with sexual misbehaviour, the civic authorities of Coventry made a concerted effort to remove all women not living within a newly defined respectable household. This programme of reform was imposed on inhabitants of the city at their Michaelmas Leet meeting in 1492.[91] No 'senglewoman' fit and able to work under the age of fifty was permitted to reside in the town, either alone or in a room in anyone's home, unless they were to go into service 'till they be maried', on the pain of a fine of 6s. 8d. If they contravened this rule a second time, they were to be imprisoned until a position was found in a household. In 1495, a further edict addressed to 'euery Maide & sole woman' under the

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[88] Ibid., ii, 465-6.
[89] It is worth noting that sex workers and chiders often appear together, as they do here, further supporting the argument that outspoken and argumentative women were associated with lechery.
[90] *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln 1517–1531*, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson (3 vols., Hereford, 1940-47), i, 46-47.
[91] *The Coventry Leet Book, or Mayor's Register, Containing Records of the City Court or View of Frankpledge, A.D. 1420-1555, With Divers Other Matters*, ed. M. D. Harris (4 Vols., London, 1907-14), ii, 544-5.

age of forty that lived alone were ordered to take a room with someone of good repute who could answer for their good behavior, or else go into service within the year. This injunction was on pain of imprisonment until surety could be found, or until they agreed to abjure the city. Sheriffs were given free rein to perform weekly searches of the houses of independent women.[92] The very existence of this second ordinance suggests that the practice of unmarried women living alone had continued despite the regulations the civic authorities issued three years earlier that forbade them from doing so – and so the restrictions were tightened, and sheriffs were pressured to enforce it through fines on noncompliance.

Goldberg argues that the 1492 programme emerged from a combination of economic contraction within Coventry alongside very particular social circumstances. He believes that it represented a radical reform manifesto associated with a faction of civic governors who had marked Lollard sympathies. As such, he views the ordinance as part of a wider utopian vision of a godly and ordered society, in which all knew their place and all worked to the common good.[93] Judith Bennett takes a very different position. She sees the Coventry ordinances as part of a much more widely applicable and long-running pattern of patriarchy. She contests Goldberg's idea that the ordinances were the product of a set of particular circumstances involving a declining economy and skewed sex ratios, and instead views the ordinances in the context of a 'compulsory service' clause that had been part of English law for almost one hundred and fifty years since the Statute of Labourers came into force in 1351. Bennett argues that in ordering able-bodied women to work in service rather than wage-labour, and in compelling them to give up independent lodgings, magistrates in the late fifteenth century were relying on an established precedent.[94]

It seems to me that the two positions need not be irreconcilable. Doubtless, fifteenth-century methods for attacking women on the basis of the sexual, social, and financial freedoms

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[92] *The Coventry Leet Book*, ii, 568.
[93] Goldberg, 'Coventry's "Lollard" Programme', 106-7.
[94] J. M. Bennett, 'Compulsory Service in Late Medieval England', *Past & Present* 209:1 (2010), 7-51, at 46. See also her *Ale, Beer and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (Oxford, 1996), for the progressive economic exclusion of women from the later fifteenth century onwards.

relied on older legal models; fear about these issues was certainly not new. But Goldberg's findings are specific to a time and place, as well as particular demographic pressures which are not unrelated to the Black Death but must also account for over a century of fluctuations in conditions. Most crucially, they highlight an *instance* of how the longer history of sexual regulation and control functions – that is, through constant remaking and renunciation.

This process continues far beyond our period. In 1584 the Manchester Leet Jury took issue with 'sengle woman' that lived 'at ther owne hands' – that is, by independently trading through baking or brewing. They further complained that these same women were 'abusing themselves [with] yonge men & others having not anny man to controle them'. The solution was to forbid any woman from living alone in the town or selling goods independently – although this is evidence of complaint only, not of enforcement.[95] The issues of economic contraction and moral dissolution, then, both find their scapegoat in the singlewoman.[96] Paul Griffiths has found that women who were discovered 'out of service' in London at the turn of the seventeenth century could be subjected to invasive examinations by a matron to ascertain whether they were a 'maid', 'no maid', 'light', or 'otherwise'.[97] The reputation of the singlewoman was sealed.[98]

The Singlewoman as a Penitential Category

It was the role allotted to singlewomen in penitentials that led Karras to conclude that they were not conceptually distinct from sex workers. Penitentials, or confessional manuals, were aids intended to help the clergy in identifying sin and assigning penance. The key text Karras invokes

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[95] This edict was reissued in 1589, and again at a later unspecified date. *The Court Leet Records of the Manor of Manchester from 1552 to 1686*, ed. J. P. Earwaker (6 vols., Manchester, 1884-90), i, 241; ii, 37, 43.

[96] Singlewomen were by no means the only scapegoats of the late medieval town. Frank Rexroth examines a similar pattern in relation to 'nightwalkers' in London in his *Power and Deviance in Late Medieval London* (Cambridge, 2007).

[97] There are three categories here of various states of non-virginity: the first is apparently incontestable, while 'light' means unchaste but is somehow distinct, and evidently there were cases where the result was indeterminate; P. Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England 1560-1640* (Oxford, 1996), 357-358.

[98] *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, eds. J. M. Bennett & A. Froide (Philadelphia, 1998).

to make her case is the fourteenth-century preacher's manual, the *Fasciculus morum*, one of a set of penitentials loosely derived and translated into Middle English from Loren d'Orléans' *Somme des vices et des vertus*, known as *Somme le Roi*, and to which we refer as the '*Somme le Roi* group'.

Karras is right to say that singlewomen are not specifically named in the *Fasciculus morum* or much elsewhere. However, Cordelia Beattie has drawn attention to the other closely cognate texts of the *Somme le Roi* group, where women are effectively classified as 'single', alongside 'maids', 'wives', 'widows', and 'prostitutes' [*meretrix*].[99] So, 'single' means something different to these latter status groups, and affects the meaning of them all. While some penitential and pastoral texts do indeed say all sexually active singlewomen were prostitutes, there are others which find utility in defining these as separate categories.[100]

We have already met another text in the *Somme le Roi* group: *Jacob's Well*. In this text, fourteen degrees of active lechery are defined by the status of the participants, except sodomy, which is the worst and fourteenth degree. In the higher degrees of sinfulness, religious office and ties of kinship are more prominent: the eleventh degree involves a secular man and religious woman, while the thirteenth is a woman and a prelate. But in lower levels, the woman's sexual status is key. In the first five, the man is described as 'syngle man', while woman's status increases the degree of sin, in the following order: 'syngle womman', 'comoun womman', 'wydewe', 'mayden', 'wyif'.[101] In this schema, a maiden cannot be read as life-stage category of the unmarried young woman, but rather the specific sexual attribution of virginity.[102] The singlewoman by contrast carries the implication of prior sexual activity, while still separated from the sex worker or 'comoun womman'. Thus, to have sex with a singlewoman, or as a singlewoman, is configured here as the least sinful form of lechery.

[99] Beattie, *Medieval Single Women*, 48-51; Beattie's translation.
[100] Karras, 'Sex and the *Singlewoman*', 129.
[101] *Jacob's Well*, 160, ll. 9-24.
[102] Beattie, *Medieval Single Women*, 51.

Two further penitentials from the *Somme le Roi* group, the *Speculum Vitae* and the *Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen*, use similar categories to *Jacob's Well*, though in less detail. *Speculum Vitae*, for example, identifies the first degree of lechery as 'Be twen syngle man and woman'.[103] However, in both of these texts, the meanings of categories are made far more explicit in their discussion of the 'seven states of chastity'. The *Myrour's* second branch of chastity encompasses:

> Hem þat haueþ be corrupt & defouled wiþ þe syne of leccherie & loste her maydenhode, as sengil man or sengil woman þat neuer was wedded, ne neuer so bounde to chastite þat þei ne may be weded…[104]
>
> [They that have been corrupt and defiled with the sin of lechery and lost their maidenhood, as a single man or a single woman who was never wed, nor never so bound to chastity that they may not be wed…]

Rather than stabilising as prostitutes, these never-married (or not-yet-married) women, in seeking penance for their past sex behaviours, may yet enter a state of grace. The *Speculum Vitae*'s second branch refers to men and women 'anelopy', meaning 'single one'.[105] In another lesser-known *Somme*-derived text, *The Desert of Religion*, the second branch is 'anlapy/ Þat has bene filed and left foly' [single ones, that have been defiled and left [their] folly].[106]

Singlewomen, then, were categorised in a penitential context from the fourteenth century onwards as a group singularly liable to fornication; but it is worth noting that their sin was deemed less serious than in the case of other groups because they had taken no vow, either to God or a spouse. Their sexuality was also less of a moral threat than sex work, as shown by its categorisation as a lesser degree of lechery, although the conflation of singlewomen and sex work in some penitentials suggests that the former category was seen as a 'gateway', or indeed tantamount, to the latter. This is far from a foregone conclusion, however, as the inclusion of singlewomen as one of the seven states of chastity demonstrates.

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[103] J. W. Smeltz, 'Speculum Vitae: An Edition of British Museum Manuscript Royal 17.C.viii' (PhD Thesis, Duquesne, PA, 1977), 440-43; *A Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen: A Prose Version of the Speculum Vitae, ed. from B. L. MS Harley 45*, ed. V. Nelson (Heidelberg, 1981), 165.
[104] *Myrour*, 184.
[105] *Speculum Vitae*, 507.
[106] 'The Desert of Religion', ed. W. Hübner, *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 126 (1911).

Legal and ecclesiastical regulatory sources taken together create a picture in which unmarried women who were assumed to be sexually active, though not necessarily engaging in sex work, were socially visible – to the point that they attracted attention in their own right. Although, as per Karras, they were at times categorised as synonymous with sex workers, this does not quite take account of the space that priests and legislators alike were making for *potential* outcomes. Fornication, or indeed sex work, did not have to be proven in order to apply categories of illicit sex-related behaviours to women. This was in part because these behaviours had the potential to become illicit sex and needed regulation in and of themselves; it was also because of the perceived threat to social order that women who had command of their bodies and finances presented more generally. Far from representing a failure of conceptualization, the ambiguity around sex-related behaviours can in fact be understood as a highly alert patriarchal strategy.

Thus far we have demonstrated that there was a significant strain of anti-feminist literature that depicted women as insatiable and unthinking sexual objects. This conceptualization was not new, and was supported by ideas from natural philosophy that found further expression in religious tracts. There was a related circular strain of social logic operating in late medieval England that enabled men to view women as inviting sexual contact through a variety of spatial and sensory factors. These supposed signals could be taken to mean that a woman was already sexually active, and by that token unable to withhold consent. But at the same time, there was a broad understanding that it was the responsibility of all Christians to protect women from sexual contact, because women themselves were so vulnerable to it and unable to resist.

Singlewomen in particular were a target of moral advice, yet apparently punitive texts were a little more nuanced than they initially appear. Moralists were comparatively relaxed about the sexual lapses of singlewomen. This conceivably had two effects. First, that singlewomen were increasingly seen as more sexually available, and with fewer consequences for men in terms of penance. But second, for the women themselves, if they were indeed sexually active, perhaps there was also space in this system to view their own sexuality as less of an aberration. These positions

sit uneasily together, but are nonetheless compatible. What follows is a consideration of how scholars have internalised misogynist discourse to the point that it appears totalising, where in fact literary texts demonstrate ambivalence.

COMPLICATING MISOGYNY

Historians have missed not only the social specificity, but also the moral complexity of medieval misogyny, especially in a literary context. Texts which, in the readings of modern scholars, have been made to appear univocal in their contempt for female subjectivity and sexual agency turn out, on closer inspection, to have a range of potential messages.

We focus in particular on representations of a matrix of sex, violence, and non-consent. On the 'blanket misogyny' reading, women's right to consent has literally no space in medieval patriarchy beyond a narrow legalistic category of *raptus*.[107] Consent does not exist, if women are at the mercy of their own insatiability. And yet we find that it does exist. Medieval literary texts were able to recognize and to thematize with precision the options available to women in a culture of sexual predation. It is with this insight in mind that we turn to consider a cluster of texts that offers a series of misogynistic responses to perceived sexual betrayal; these texts are not yet observed as forming a specific grouping in any examination of anti-feminist lyrics in Middle English. Subsequently, we explore the 'weeping bitch' tradition, as exemplified by *Dame Sirith*, to find more awareness of sexual violence in medieval authors than in their modern readers, where men are recognised to be the problem. Lastly, we witness a final critical response to the ideas that we have explored in this chapter. We see that men who attacked women based on their sexual misbehaviour, or who viewed women as sexually available because they were sexually active, were sometimes portrayed as more disruptive and more sinful than the women they scrutinized.

[107] For which see Dunn, *Stolen Women*, 18-51.

'PLUK', 'PULLE', AND 'TURN'

The new cluster of texts that I want to consider consists of two lyric refrains, found in five lyrics of the fifteenth century. These refrains are alike in tone, and together can be viewed as a coherent tradition.[108] Their status as a group is further supported by a consistency of date, and of poetic form in four of the five lyrics; written (some more successfully than others) in eight line stanzas with ababbcbc rhyming schemes, it seems most reasonable to argue that they were indeed variations on a recognised form and theme.[109] These lyrics explore the trope of women's infidelity, using animal metaphors such as the unbreakable mare or the hawk that cannot be recalled.[110] While the changeability and voracity of women has already been explored at length, we can now approach these five understudied lyrics with the purpose of demonstrating the potential violence of their messaging, but also the ways in which the lyrics are in conversation with other discourses, even on occasion speaking against themselves.

The first refrain is 'Turne up hur halter and lat hur go'. It appears in *I not what I shall syng nor say*, London, British Library MS Harley 5396, and *As I cowthe walke be cause of recreacioun*, London, British Library MS Additional 38666. BL MS Harley 5396 is a composite miscellany of theology, medicine, and lyrics. The collection of verse comprises a discrete section which dates from c. 1456, and includes the didactic poem *How the wyse man taght hys son* alongside *I not what I shall syng nor say*.[111] It is unclear who originally copied the lyrics, but their dialect is mostly of Nottinghamshire, and in the later fifteenth century one 'Wylyam Northe of Yorke' adds his name at f. 280v.[112] BL MS

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[108] F. L. Utley, *The Crooked Rib: An Analytical Index to the Argument About Women in English and Scots Literature to the End of the Year 1568* (Columbus, 1944), 47-8 mentions a group of ten 'amusing' lyrics that urge casting off love with hunting and hawking metaphors. This group subsumes four of the five texts to which I am referring, and evidently reads them quite differently to the interpretation I am presenting.

[109] 'Loke er thin herte be set' is the exception; see below, 72-3.

[110] There are resonances in this with the Old French romance *Le Chevalier à L'Épée*, in which Gauvain abandons his wife after she chooses another knight over him, comparing her lack of constancy to her loyal greyhounds, who he deems more worthy of his care. See E. Cooke Armstrong, '*Le Chevalier à L'Épée*: An Old French Poem' (PhD Thesis, John Hopkins University, 1897).

[111] 'I not what I shall syng nor say', London, British Library Harley 5396, fol. 292; DIMEV 2237; *Reliquiae Antiquae*, eds. T. Wright & J. Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps (2 Vols., London, 1845), i, 75-7.

[112] e-LALME, 1.113.

Additional 38666 is almost entirely dedicated to one text: a long-form poem on the Life of Christ arranged around feast days. Our lyric is added on a flyleaf at the end in a late-fifteenth century hand.[113] The final occurrence of this refrain is in *Loke er thin herte be set,* London, British Library MS Sloane 2593, compiled in the first half of the fifteenth century.[114] This must be treated a little differently as it appears in a lyric with a different form and chorus, with 'Knet vp the heltre, and let here goo' rather being used as the final line of the first stanza.

The second refrain of this set is 'pluk/pulle of here bellys and let here fly', found in *Who carpys of byrddys of gret jentrys*, Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.9.38, and *When men motyth of byrdys of gret gentree*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C.86. Trinity MS O.9.38 dates from the mid-fifteenth century, and so around the same time as BL MS Harley 5396.[115] It is likewise a miscellany of theology, medicine, and lyrics, though it actually began its life as an account book for Glastonbury Abbey, and further includes literary prose. Bodleian MS Rawlinson C.86 is another miscellany of the mid-fifteenth century, most likely from Shropshire.[116] Like BL MS Harley 5396, it also contains an instructional lyric *Stans puer ad mensam*, and so might reasonably be read as having an educative function. The lyrics of *When men motyth of byrdys of gret gentree* are almost identical to the Trinity O.9.38 version, although shorter - the latter is thirteen stanzas, while the former mixes phrases and cuts the whole to eight stanzas.

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113 'As I cowthe walke be cause of recreacioun', London, British Library MS Additional 38666, fols. 174-174v; DIMEV 597; R. H. Robbins, *Secular Lyrics of the XIV and XV Centuries* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1955), 180-1; This MS is particularly itinerant, with provenance connecting it in chronological order to Durham Cathedral St Bride Major Glamorganshire, Merton College Oxford, and a number of private owners of the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

114 'Loke er thin herte be set', London, British Library MS Sloane 2593, f. 9v; DIMEV 3172; EEC, 270-1; I do not include a description of this MS here, as it will be treated extensively in Chapter Three, 211-12.

115 'Who carpys of byrddys of gret jentrys', Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.9.38, fols. 21-22; DIMEV 6542; *Reliquiae Antiquae*, i, 27-9.

116 'When men motyth of byrdys of gret gentree', Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson C.86, fols. 59v-60v; DIMEV 6542; R. Cords, 'Fünf mittelenglische Gedichte aus den Handschrifts Rawlinson Poetry 36 und Rawlinson C.86', *Archiv für Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 135 (1916), 292-302, at 298-300; See also A. McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and M. Benskin, *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*, (4 vols., Aberdeen, 1986), iv, 233.

All of the lyrics bar *As I cowthe walke be cause of recreacioun* – which I will deal with separately – follow a similar trajectory. The narrative is loosely as follows. A man woos a woman with gifts, luxuries, and words of love. Having won the object of his desire, he begins to suspect that she is unfaithful. The lyrics then turn to the souring of extra-marital love, where women simultaneously demand too much and stray too far. This, they say, is inevitable, as women cannot help themselves. The speakers dismiss women as a whole as being unworthy of men's time and attention, in a way that reads as commiseration for rejected or betrayed lovers:

> Of maydens I wil seyn but lytil
> For they be bothe fals and fekyll
> And vnder the tayl they ben ful tekyl
> A twenty deuele name let hem go.[117]
>
> [Of maidens I will say but a little
> For they are both false and fickle
> And under the tail they are very loose
> In twenty devils' names, let her go]

These lyrics diverge in their response to the idea of generalising about women. In *Who carpys of byrddys of gret jentrys*, the speaker makes a distinction between goodwives, of whom he does not speak, and 'small damsellys' [young women] who 'With ther mysgovernawnce makyth wyves to be shent' [with their misgovernance cause wives to be ruined].[118] Not all the texts make such distinctions. *Loke er thin herte be set* also works through wives, widows, and maidens, and finds them all to be equally unfaithful. *When men motyth of byrdys of gret gentree* says that there is not a true woman to be found in 'all England', concludes with a flourish that all of them will fly 'to þe devell' [to the devil] in the end.[119]

One of this lyric set, however, offers an alternative view of women. *As I cowthe walke be cause of recreacioun* sits apart from the others in that it is arranged as a dialogue, between a clerk and a husbandman. The lyric employs two alternating refrains: the clerk repeats 'Quia amore langueo',

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[117] 'Loke er thin herte be set', ll. 15-18; see a similar expression in 'I not what I shall syng nor say', ll. 9-12.
[118] 'Who carpys of byrddys of gret jentrys', ll. 87-8.
[119] 'When men motyth of byrdys of gret gentree', Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson C.86, fols. 59v-60v.

while the husbandman responds 'turn ype hyr haltur and let hyr goo'.[120] The lyric's first editor, Carleton Brown, noted that the two refrains balance each other in rhyme and metre. 'Quia amore langueo' is most likely the older refrain, with multiple attestations in complaints where the Virgin or Christ pleads for the love of man.[121] Here, it is reconfigured as a secular expression, where the clerk languishes in love for a woman.

This lyric is particularly interesting as it is not clear who comes off as the wiser. The husbandman seeks to correct the clerk's 'insolens' [insolence], but it is the clerk who gets the last word against the husbandman's 'myspreue' [false evidence].[122] By the close of the 56-line debate, the two men are rendered as ridiculous as each other by their exaggerated but poorly supported arguments: the husbandman presents a barrage of clichés, while the lovelorn clerk's protestations that 'gode made woman for mannys relefe' [God made woman for man's pleasure/satisfaction] rather undermines his order.[123] While readers might place themselves with one or the other, those in on the joke may have concluded that hyperbolic expressions of women's evil or perfection were both flawed.

Rather than equating the view of the text with that of society, *As I cowthe walke be cause of recreacioun* demonstrates that at least one writer found alternative ways of engaging with the core text to question and undercut its message, and perhaps even viewed men who responded to infidelity with violence in a negative light. This does not the undercut the other lyrics of the cluster, but rather demonstrates that more than one response to their content was possible. I have thus begun to demonstrate that there is space to view complex engagements with sexuality in misogynist

120 'As I cowthe walke be cause of recreacioun', London, British Library MS Additional 38666, fols. 174-174v.
121 C. Brown, 'Dialogue Between a Clerk and a Husbandman', *Modern Language Notes* 33:7 (1918), 415-417. 'Quia amore langueo' is a vastly popular refrain. Richard Rolle's 'Form of Living' incorporates two stanzas with the refrain, which appears in twenty-three Rolle manuscripts (for which see DIMEV 6482); See also 'In the valle of restles mynd', with two manuscript witnesses, DIMEV 2464; 'In a tabernacle of a towre', eight witnesses, DIMEV 2461.
122 'As I cowthe walke be cause of recreacioun', London, British Library MS Additional 38666, fols. 174-174v.
123 Ibid.

literary sources, and it is with this insight that we move forward to consider how our own reading strategies may shape our understanding and application of dominant discourse.

DAME SIRITH, AND THE INTERLUDIUM DE CLERICO ET PUELLA

I have proposed above that, having identified a dominant discourse, we too readily assign misogynistic attitudes in medieval texts which may actually be quite complicated.[124] In order to demonstrate this, I turn now to the tale of *Dame Sirith*, which has received considerable scholarly treatment. Themes of the tale, in particular the spaces in which the action occurs, and the conversations between the characters, have resonances with the prescriptive sources that we explored earlier in the chapter. But because scholars have not acknowledged the tensions and gaps in normative sources, we miss coercive patterns in texts when they do appear.

The tale of *Dame Sirith* is the only widely recognised example of a Middle English *fabliau* outside Chaucer's well-known corpus.[125] *Dame Sirith* diverges from *fabliaux* in that it is written as a script as if for performance, and does not seek to impart a moral message at the end of the tale, whether serious or mischievous. Indeed, in Michael Swanton's estimation, *Dame Sirith* is 'pure narrative…stripped of all psychological, situational, or symbolic complexity'.[126] This apparent simplicity informs much of the existing scholarly work on *Dame Sirith*, which, as we shall see, too easily takes anti-feminism as the default position for interpretation, resulting in readings that consistently gloss coerced consent as successful seduction.

The narrative of *Dame Sirith* turns on a ploy known as the 'weeping bitch' tradition. The basic conceit of the 'weeping bitch' is that a priest, rejected in love, seeks vengeful sex by way of a trick with the woman who has rebuffed him. The tricked woman is faced with a predicament: agree

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[124] See above, 69.
[125] B. D. H. Miller, 'The Early History of Bodleian MS Digby 86', *Annuale Mediaevale IV* (1963), 23-56; For discussions of Chaucer and the *fabliaux,* see R. E. Lewis, 'The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's "Miller's Tale"', *Modern Philology* 79 (1982), 241–55; M. Furrow, 'Middle English Fabliaux and Modern Myth', *English Literary History* 56 (1989), 1-18; J. Hines, *The Fabliaux in English* (London, 1993), 43-70.
[126] M. Swanton, *English Poetry Before Chaucer* (Exeter, 2002), 245.

to sex with the priest, or face being transformed into a dog. The tale is found in various continental versions, and there is a further tradition beyond Europe.[127] The Middle English *Alphabet of Tales* explicitly uses the word 'consent' in connection to this tale to describe refusing sex: 'becauce sho wolde not consent vnto a yong man þat luffid hur…þus sho was shapen to be a biche whelpe' [because she would not consent to a young man that loved her…thus she was transformed into a bitch dog].[128]

In *Dame Sirith*, a merchant leaves his wife, Margery, to attend a fair at Boston. The implied possessiveness of the husband may mark him as a *senex amans* [aged lover], such as John in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, or January in *The Merchant's Tale*.[129] Like French *fabliaux*, the location is provincial – Boston rather than London, much like Abbeville or Arras rather than Paris. A clerk, Wilekin, approaches Margery while her husband is away to proclaim his 'love' for her. She refuses him; the clerk then seeks out an older woman known as Dame Sirith for help. Dame Sirith suspects him of trying to catch her engaging in witchcraft, but accepts 20 shillings to solve the problem. Dame Sirith feeds her dog mustard to make its eyes run as is it were weeping, then goes to Margery's house under the pretext of begging for charity. She tells Margery that her daughter was turned into a dog by a clerk whose advances she had refused. Margery panics and asks Dame Sirith to bring Wilekin to her so that she does not meet the same fate. The poem ends with Dame Sirith encouraging Wilekin to finish what he has started, then offering her services to any man in such endeavours.[130]

To turn now to the endeavours of modern readers, Margery's rebuffs are dismissed by multiple scholars as formulaic platitudes – merely part of the script of extra-marital seduction –

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[127] For example, 'Exemplum XIII, De canicula lacrimante', *Petri Alfonsi Disciplina Clericalis: Französische Versbearbeitungen*, ed. A. Hilka and W. Söderhjelm (Helsinki, 1922), 3–78. Thank you to Fiona Somerset for also drawing my attention to Somadeva, 'The Red Lotus of Chastity', *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen, eds. M. Puchner et al (6 vols., New York, 2013), i, 1274-1279.
[128] *An Alphabet of Tales: an English 15th Century Translation of the Alphabetum Nattationum of Ètienne de Besançon. from Addition MS. 25, 719 of the British Museum*, ed. M. Macleod Banks (2 vols., 1904-5), ii, 361.
[129] 'Dame Sirith', l.70-3, 83-4; K. Busby, 'Dame Sirith and De Clerico et Puella' in *Companion to Early Middle English Literature*, ed. N. H. G. E. Veldhoen and A. Aertsen (Amsterdam, 1995), 67-78, at 74.
[130] 'Dame Sirith', ll. 29-43.

rather than as expressions of non-consent. Indeed, John Hines suggests Margery undercuts her own conditions for hearing Wilekin out: after saying that 'If þat þou me tellest skil/ I shal don after þi wil' [If what you say to me is reasonable/ I shall do as you will], she continues that she would not blame him if he said anything shameful.[131] This reading of Margery as 'not much more than a dumb blonde', having 'little in her mind', 'ill-endowed' and 'ironically naive' follows the perspective of Wilekin in reading sexual licence into her offers to help the clerk in whatever way she might:[132]

> Margery, the stupid wife […] is particularly funny because she is so unthinkingly conventionally good, [she] effaces any real self she may be imagined to have within a cluster of cliches. She has no sense of her own sexuality […][133]

This reading of Margery as an example of the 'dumb blonde' trope is unproblematically reproduced by Theresa Hamilton, who claims that she 'plays hard-to-get but is easily deceived'.[134] Gabriel Ford rejects Hines' reading, yet considers Margery to be inviting Wilekin into a teasing verbal performance:

> While that flirtation remains equivocatory, the pious but genial Margery plays along. She phrases her openness to Wilekin in terms [that are] generous and suggestive […] As these responses show, the seduction toes up to the line of acquiescence in this opening scene.[135]

While less obviously abrasive, Ford nonetheless interprets Margery's refusals as toying with ambiguity, implicitly encouraging, and demonstrative that she is open to persuasion. Keith Busby comes to a similar conclusion, finding that Margery's offer to help the clerk in any way that he wills 'acquires in retrospect an ironic tinge'.[136] Of her later rejection of the clerk's advances, Busby continues:

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131 Ibid., ll. 52-3.
132 Hines, *The Fabliaux in English*, 50-1.
133 Ibid., 61.
134 T. Hamilton, *Humorous Structures of English, 1200-1600* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2013), 104.
135 G. Ford, '"Wose is onwise": Dame Sirith in Context', *Studies in Philology* 114:2 (2017), 223-244, at 232-3.
136 Busby, 'Dame Sirith and De Clerico et Puella', at 73.

> The lady's reaction to this confession is disappointing, especially in the light of her earlier hint of readiness to oblige: she indignantly invokes the holy sacrament of marriage, the duty of wife to husband…and the strength of the love between them.[137]

In these analyses, literary critics make deductions about Margery's character from the fact that she maintains a conversation with Wilekin, instead of telling him to go away from the outset. Like the injunctions of *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage* and *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, Margery speaking at all is taken by scholars to signify her sexual availability.[138] They conclude that conversation is indicative of consent, and that she is merely playing a part of faux-reluctance, adhering to a social script of fidelity when really, she means yes.

Margery's response is certainly formulaic, but perhaps not in the way Hines, Ford, or Busby imagine. Tory Vandeventer Pearman gestures towards an alternative reading where the role of threat is crucial to understanding this character's development: 'the young and true wife becomes the eager adulterer *to save her own body*'.[139] This change in emphasis creates potential for reading coerced consent in the tale.

A close reading reveals that Margery attempts multiple strategies to convey non-consent less directly in a situation where she is under threat. These tactics have been overlooked by critics until now. First, the character maintains ignorance; a tactic of safety in a potentially volatile situation, where her husband is absent and therefore unable to protect her.[140] Next, as we have seen, she bargains: 'if that thou me tellest skil,/ I shal don after thi wil'.[141] Margery thus attempts to ensure her manner remains courteous while making it clear that there is a limit to what she might do. Both methods reflect the fact that from the outset Margery is constrained by the power imbalance between her and the clerk. When he begs her to take him as her secret lover, her pleas

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137 Busby, 'Dame Sirith and De Clerico et Puella', 74.
138 See above, 52-4.
139 Pearman's focus, however, is on the figure of Dame Sirith herself; T. Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York, 2010), 29, my emphasis.
140 'Dame Sirith', ll. 31-6.
141 Ibid., ll. 50-53; In the Alphabet of Tales version, she is simply reported to say she 'wolde not on no wyse' [would not in any circumstances]. *An Alphabet of Tales*, ii, 361.

for him to think of her husband declare her will in perhaps the only way she believes this lecherous clerk will understand:

> Nevermore his lif-wile
> Þau he were an hondred mile
> Biȝende Rome
> For noþing ne shuld I take
> Mon on erþe to ben mi make
> Ar his hom com[142]
>
> [Never during his lifetime
> Even if he were a hundred miles
> Beyond Rome
> Not for anything should I take
> Any man on earth to be my mate
> Before his homecoming]

By degrees, we see the unwillingness of a man in a position of power over a woman to accept basic cues to her lack of interest. She even directly tells him to go home, exhorting him as her brother: 'þou miȝt gon home, leve broþer' [you might go home, dear brother].[143] It is plausible to read 'miȝt' as having the even stronger sense of 'should' here, yet both the fictional Wilekin and the modern scholar take this to be a further potential invitation.[144] The stark reality of the *fabliaux* is this: they are so rooted in the male pursuit for sexual conquest that even as the women enact the only methods available to them to express their refusal of consent, these are blatantly reconstructed, both then and now, as obstacles to be overcome. Non-consent can thus appear as a mere platitude.

It is here in the tale that Dame Sirith enters, and twice threatens that if Margery does not have sex with the clerk, he will transform her into a 'bicche'.[145] If scholars afford the text the complexity of consistently reading Margery's rejections as invitations, those of us interested in histories of consent might equally read a little more deeply here. 'Bycche' is used in multiple Middle English contexts as an insult with derogatory links to both femininity and sexual laxity.[146] Margery's

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[142] 'Dame Sirith', ll. 103-8.
[143] Ibid., l. 135; There is potential to read 'leve brother' even more explicitly as an injunction to 'leave'.
[144] Hines, *The Fabliaux in English*, 53; Busby, 'Dame Sirith and De Clerico et Puella', 74.
[145] 'Dame Sirith', l.354; 372.
[146] See for example The Chester Mystery Cycle, eds. D Mills and R. M. Lumiansky (London, 1974), 196, l. 297; *The Macro Plays*, ed. M. Eccles (New York, 1969), 66, l. 148; Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, 18, l. 500.

fear is not of becoming a dog: it is that Wilekin is a man who cannot hear 'no' and is not going to stop pursuing her, to cause her reputational and physical harm. The threat of becoming a 'bycche' could represent how Wilekin already perceives her, and what is going to happen, whether with or without her consent.[147]

If this reading is correct, it is particularly significant, because this is the moment when Margery relents, and tells Dame Sirith to fetch Wilekin back. First, Margery attempts to understand the extent to which she is being coerced by asking, 'Hou troustu, nelde, ich moue ascape?' [How, do you think, grandma, I might escape?].[148] When Dame Sirith tells her there is, in fact, no escape, Margery says:

> That he hevede enes leien bi me,
> And efftsones bigunne.[149]
>
> [That he should have once (and *only* once) lain with me,
> And soon begun.]

'Enes' has a conditional connotation, meaning 'on one (and only one) occasion'.[150] It is hard to see the eagerness in this. Rather, the sentiment reads: 'if he were to sleep with me only once, and made it as quick as possible'. What scholars take to be a complete U-turn into enthusiasm – for Hines, she 'yearns for [the clerk] with an eagerness', and for Swanton, she is a 'smug, posturing bourgeois wife who tumbles on to her back at the first real push' – may be much more literally a bid to get out alive and as un-traumatised as possible.[151]

What we know about women in *fabliaux* is that they are pretty good at seeing through the trick. Women in *fabliaux* are rarely duped – but that does not mean we should read Margery's acceptance as willingness. Scholars have further theorised that *Dame Sirith* is meant to be presented as a drama, or dramatic reading – the narrative is unintelligible without external differentiation of

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147 Busby does briefly distinguish between freely given consent and Margery's motivations for making herself amiable to the clerk. See Busby, 'Dame Sirith and De Clerico et Puella', 77.
148 'Dame Sirith', l. 370
149 Ibid., ll. 384-5
150 MED enes adv. 1(a) On one (and only one) occasion; once, just once.
151 Hines, *The Fabliaux in English*, 55; Swanton, *English Poetry Before Chaucer*, 251.

the characters. What were the audience meant to take from this performance? At least one possible reading is that Margery recognises her entrapment, and transitions from vocal resistance to a language of appeasement.[152] It is only having exhausted all other options that Margery alights on the path to allowing the clerk to have his way. It is the scholar's responsibility to recognise that the choice to survive does not equate to consent.

It is evident that more than language impacts the interpretative decisions of scholars. Assumptions about sexual status also bring to bear on whether we read consent or non-consent; for evidence of this, we can look to compare *Dame Sirith* with other Middle English versions of the tale. The *Interludium de clerico et puella* contains elements of *Dame Sirith*, but is only a fragment preserved on a fourteenth-century strip of vellum.[153] The *Interludium* opens with a 'damishel' who is accosted by a clerk when she is alone in the house of either her parents or her employers.[154] In stark contrast to his characterisation of Margery, Hines finds the unnamed girl to be 'determined', 'fittingly […] quite unmoved, giving him two clear rejections'.[155] But there are significant similarities in Margery and the girl's rebuttals. Both say they cannot love any man, and neither will have him in her house or on her floor – a comment that Hines reads as sexually suggestive for the wedded Margery, but not for the 'mayden' girl.[156] In *Dame Sirith* Margery is coerced into sex, while the *Interludium* ends with the elderly woman refusing to help the clerk.[157] The same acts, gestures, and words are given completely different treatment by scholars, and this appears to be at least partly dependent on whether or not the character is sexually assaulted.

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[152] In their study of young women's experiences of coerced consent, Cynthia A. Stappenbeck et al find that 'Women may consent in response to…coercive tactics for a variety of reasons, including a desire to maintain the relationship or fear of being harmed'. C. A. Stappenbeck et al, 'An Event-Level Investigation of Factors Associated with Young Women's Experiences of Coerced Consensual Sex', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 35:1-2 (2020), 384-402, at 385.
[153] 'Interludium de clerico et puella', in *The Trials and Joys of Marriage*, ed. E. Salisbury (Kalamazoo, 2002), 29-43.
[154] 'Ibid., ll. 1-4
[155] Hines, *The Fabliaux in English*, 68-9.
[156] 'Interludium', l. 15; 'Dame Sirith', ll. 100-2; Hines, *The Fabliaux in English*, 53.
[157] Ibid., ll. 70-8.

Examining *Dame Sirith* with a greater alertness to the danger of under-reading sexual violence has demonstrated that lyrics containing non-consent do not present an unqualified norm, but rather explore ambivalences around sexual coercion and women's bodies. Scholars who seek to understand medieval women's sexual subjectivity must at times reckon with sources that conflate coerced consent with freely given consent. But the current academic discussion can barely be separated from this vision, as literary historians have unconsciously accepted this conflation. Margery's performance of acquiescence is calculated rather than heartfelt. By looking only for confirmation of misogynist discourse, scholars participate in its reproduction. In other words, we lack critical separation from the 'norm' in the text. The method I have proposed to counter this intersubjective problem is an ethical feminist reading practice. By reading consent carefully, the power dynamics underlying sex then and now are brought to the fore. The crux upon which the conceit – that the woman is sexually entrapped – hangs, is legible only if we read coerced consent for what it is.

PUNISHMENT AS HYPOCRISY: RESPONDING TO MISBEHAVIOUR

Finally, I want to explore medieval critical engagement with misogynist attacks on women's sexuality in another context: liturgical drama where men's condemnation of women's sexual misbehaviour is typically portrayed as problematic and heavy-handed. Plays are a particularly interesting forum in which to consider this aspect. There are multiple forms of messaging available, where players might speak or react to the audience as much as their fellows. In the *N-Town Plays* and *York Corpus Christi Plays*, the mercy of God in these cases is understood as miraculous, benevolent beyond the capacity of mankind. Yet, on a very basic level, the audience is led to view women's sexual misbehaviour as deserving of mercy, and the men who condemn them as hypocritical and unjust.[158]

[158] This theme is also present in the Parisian group of *Miracles de Nostre Dame*, for which see *Le Miracle de l'Enfant Ressuscité: quinzième des Miracles de Nostre Dame par personnages*, ed. G. A. Runnalls (Genéve, 1972).

The *N-Town* play cycle includes a dramatization of the tale of the woman taken in adultery, who is sentenced to be stoned to death for her crime. The central point of this tale is that the Pharisee and Scribe seek to expose Jesus as a hypocrite after he states the rule of Matthew 7:12 to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, only to have this turned back on themselves. The two men of the judiciary engage in extended sexual insult of the woman, with a focus on the sensory overload of her presence. The court clerk calls the woman 'stynkynge bych clowte' [stinking ragged bitch].[159] In the *York Corpus Christi* version of the same tale, she is a 'stynkand strye' [stinking hag].[160] Through sensory description, the woman is identified as a sexual sinner. This established, the men threaten her with violence, even death, to teach her to 'bettyr…kepe thi kutte' [better…control your cunt].[161] In this, the play appears to confirm what we have seen in moral and literary discourse: that sexual sin is apparent on women's bodies, and their misbehaviour makes them the rightful target of violence.

A sulphurous stench betrays sexual sinners in other contexts. For one preacher, those who live in lust can be known by their 'stinkinde sinnis' [stinking sins].[162] This could be related to the burning lake of Revelations 21:8, but also the fire and brimstone that rained on Sodom and Gomorrah.[163] The *Fasciculus morum* meanwhile invokes Pliny's animal symbolism of the flesh:

> The goat, which according to the Philosopher is a bad smelling and unclean animal, and smells worse behind than in front, symbolizes the flesh, whose lusts and deeds around found to be ever ugly and evil the more they occur.[164]

Carole Rawcliffe has also identified examples of civic ordinances that make connections between evil smells and sexual misbehaviour. This could be literal, as in the 1422 attempt to close a Cripplegate brothel where jurors complained of the 'privy of the stew-house as a nuisance because

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159 'Woman taken in adultery', *The N-Town Plays*, ed. D. Sugano (Kalamazoo, 2007), l. 147.
160 'Woman taken in adultery', *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. C. Davidson (Kalamazoo, 2011), l. 13.
161 'Woman taken in adultery', *N-Town Plays*, l. 152.
162 Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.1.45, fol. 41v.
163 'But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur'; See also Genesis 19:24.
164 *Fasciculus Morum: a Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, ed. S. Wenzel (London, 1989), 662-3.

of the great corruption coming therefrom'.[165] Ian Forrest meanwhile notes one particularly memorable scent-based decimation of a witness' character to render her testimony worthless in a matrimonial suit in Canterbury in 1412. The witness was reported as being known to often walk abroad in search of sexual partners, once even falling into a cesspit on her way to a lover's house. This scatological anecdote served to further demonstrate her sexual laxity.[166]

However, some key moments in the liturgical drama lead the audience to question this broadly understood connection, and view the Pharisee and Scribe's behaviour and accusations as unjust. Although the woman is repeatedly referred to as 'stynkynge', this adjective is also used by the Scribe in the opening scene to describe Jesus, whom he calls a 'stynkynge beggere' [stinking beggar].[167] This establishes a descriptive resonance between the woman and Christ. Further, it is evident that the Pharisee and Scribe have no intention of equally meting out punishment; the man with whom the woman is found runs away even as his 'breche be not yett well upteyd' [breeches are not yet fastened up].[168] In the *York Corpus Christi* iteration, the man does not even appear.[169] No effort is made to apprehend him, while the judiciary shout abuses at the woman. There is most certainly a reliance on antisemitic feeling in leading the audiences' judgements in tales such as this, with an emphasis on the perceived brutality of Mosaic law.[170] The audience is meant to side with Christ, and this is reinforced by presenting excessive legal violence as something only Jewish authorities would do. Perhaps the message for Christian audiences was twofold. Along with confirming antisemitic feeling in the audience, the further entanglement produced here is one of associating misogynistic insult with inadvertently attacking the Virgin Mary.

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165 *CPMRL, 1413-1417*, 154, quoted in C. Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (Woodbridge, 2013), 106. From more on civic ordinances against sex work, see ibid. 105-115.
166 Forrest, *Trustworthy Men*, 233.
167 'Woman taken in adultery', *N-Town Plays*, l. 48.
168 Ibid, l. 139.
169 'Woman taken in adultery', *York Corpus Christi Play*.
170 On representation of Jewish communities in mystery plays, see S. Spector, 'Anti-Semitism and the English Mystery Plays', in *The Drama of the Middle Ages: Comparative and Critical Essays* (New York, 1982), 328-41; E. Cohen and E. Horowitz, 'In search of the Sacred: Jews, Christians, and the Rituals of Marriage in the Later Middle Age', *JMRS* 20 (1990), 225-49.

N-Town's 'Trial of Mary and Joseph' also draws attention to the problematic role of the community in deciding the reputation of their neighbours. The play opens with the Summoner calling forward thirty-four men and women with names associated with promiscuity, such as 'Geffrey Gyle' and 'Kate Kelle'.[171] Two Detractors meet at the court with the express aim 'To reyse slawndyr' [to raise slander].[172] They tell the story of Mary's pregnancy, leering over 'such a mursel' [such a morsel], with her youthful beauty and 'schap so comely' [attractive figure]. They assert a range of guesses as to the situation: perhaps Joseph had assaulted Mary, unable to wait for their wedding; or perhaps a young man cuckolded him. She would have people know her as 'holy', when in truth, to the Detractors:

> Such a Yonge damsel of bewté bright
> And of schap so comely also
> Of hir tayle ofte tyme be light
> And rygh tekyl undyr thee, too![173]
>
> [A young woman of beauty bright
> And with such an attractive body
> With her genitals will often be lascivious
> And very wanton under you, too!]

While this is hard to translate idiomatically, 'tayle' and 'tekyll' sometimes go together as the word 'tikeltaylle', which has the double meaning of a woman who enjoys sex, and is exciting to have sex with. There is a double standard at play where the men both condemn and are titillated by the object of their condemnation. So we come full circle, back to Lydgate and his 'tikeltayll[s]'.[174] But here the Detractors, themselves lusting after Mary, are the unsavoury characters, hypocritical in their highly sexualised insults of both Mary and Joseph.[175] If the audience was in any doubt, when

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171 'Trial of Mary and Joseph', *N-Town Plays*, ll. 9, 15; For discussion of the meaning of 'kelle', see below, Chapter Two, 148-9.
172 'Trial of Mary and Joseph', *N-Town Plays*, l. 40.
173 Ibid, ll. 95-8
174 Lydgate, 'Prohemy of a Mariage', l. 109; See above, 42, n. 6.
175 See E. M. Solberg's discussion of this episode in her *Virgin Whore* (Ithaca, 2018), 63.

one of the Detractors is forced to drink the same potion of purgation, his head burns until he repents his 'cursyd and fals langage' [cursed and false language].[176]

In medieval literary imagination, Mary is of course exceptional. Perhaps, though, the characters of the Detractors were all too familiar to audiences; libidinous and judgemental gossips who do not necessarily have any grounds for their accusations, but will throw all their weight behind punishment of a young pregnant woman.[177] The play concludes with the two Detractors being forced to drink the bitter waters too; they are stricken with sickness and beg Mary's forgiveness.[178] In contrast to Dame Sirith, here we experience a very different mechanism of gendered sexual discourse where men's words, too, can be rendered hollow and stingless by their repetition.

CONCLUSION

Although women were viewed as insatiable, they were simultaneously expected to try to avoid sexual encounters. Space, gaze, activities, speech, and social context all played into whether behaviours were viewed as signalling promiscuity. The literary texts explored here both deny and insist upon women's agency: they are imagined as sexually compulsive, and yet also culpable.

The most dangerous effect of this dominant discourse is that it sought to absolve men of responsibility for sexual violence, in terms familiar to all of us. If this discourse ran unchecked, it was impossible for a woman characterized as insatiable to say no – and so the forced imposition of sex was presented as a paradox, a misnomer. The result was a fantasy of compulsive sexual behaviour common to all women that drove them indiscriminately to seek out sexual encounters, licit or illicit. There was simply no imaginative space for feminine sexual choice or self-reflexivity. The pervasiveness of this assumption is not limited to medieval anti-feminist satire. The texts

176 'Trial of Mary and Joseph', *N-Town Plays*, l. 367.
177 'Trial of Mary and Joseph', *N-Town Plays*, ll. 370-73.
178 These stock figures operate similarly to the *Losengiers* of French poetry and romance, who reveal adulterers but are nonetheless demonised. See E. Baumgartner, 'Trouvéres et "Losengiers"', *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 25e année, 99-100 (1982), 171-78.

reviewed in this chapter tap into a common set of stereotypes about women's sexuality – stereotypes that modern historians themselves treat as normative, even historians of women and gender (although this group signal disapproval of such attitudes). Either it is argued that female sexuality is inaccessible to modern eyes, or just as painfully, medieval male commentary is treated as representing the consensus of an entirely misogynistic society.

This is a needlessly pessimistic habit of reading. While it might seem more discerning to critique this misogynistic literature as silencing women, it is also rather lazy. It is true that one thing that emerges from this chapter is a darker and more violent picture of sexual discourse, where ideas that informed sexual regulation had real consequences for women and absolved men. These ideas found renewed and particular expression where women lived outside of natal, marital, or monastic contexts. But we can also read more carefully, recognising that a range of literary texts which have been read with a misogynist lens or ignored entirely, do actually acknowledge the mechanics of sexual threat and condemnation. They subtly question attacks on women as hypocritical, excessively violent, and ultimately less successful in reducing sexual misbehaviour than care and rehabilitation.

We now look to open up other understudied texts that shed light on medieval attitudes to women's sexuality. In the next chapter, we shall explore how the content of the corpus of lyrics referred to as 'Women's songs' might further disrupt and provide some corrective to the characterisation of dominant anti-feminist discourse as the sole conceptualisation of women's sexuality in later medieval England.

CHAPTER TWO – ARTICULATING PLEASURE IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

INTRODUCTION

In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the Welsh poet Gwerful Machain (c.1460-c.1502) issued a challenge to her lyrical fellows:

> Gadewch yn hael, gafael ged,
> Gerddau cedor I gerdded.
> Sawden awdl, sidan ydiw,
> Sêm fach len ar gont wen wiw,
> Lleiniau mewn man ymannerch,
> Y llwyn sur, llawn yw o serch,
> Fforest filch iawn, ddawn ddifreg,
> Ffris ffrail, ffwrwr dwygaill deg,
> Pant yw hwy no llwy yn llaw,
> Clawdd I ddal cal ddwy ddwylaw.
> Trwsglwyn merch, drud annerch dro,
> Berth addwyn, Duw'n borth iddo.[1]
>
> [To all you upright poets,
> Be prolific in your songs to the vagina
> Let them proliferate and gain reward.
> It's silky, a sultan of an ode,
> A little curtained seam on a lovely white cunt,
> Flaps in a place of intercourse,
> Great proud forest, faultless gift,
> Fragile frieze, fur for a good pair of balls,
> It's a hollow longer than a spoon or hand,
> A bush to a hold a penis two hands wide;
> A girl's thicket, precious ringlet of greeting,
> Noble bush, may God save it.]

No named historic woman responds in Middle English. Yet an anonymous cacophony sings back to Gwerful, of pleasurable sex, beautiful vaginas, women's faultlessness – and a few 'good pair[s] of balls'.

[1] 'Cywydd y cedor' [Poem to the Vagina], in *The Works of Gwerful Mechain*, ed. and trans. K. Gramich (Peterborough, On., 2018), 40-45, at 45. There are thirteen manuscripts of the *cywydd*, attesting its wide appeal.

The central conceptual question for this chapter is how to approach the apparent structural silences around women's bodies, desires, and pleasures we have encountered thus far when we are faced with medieval texts that do voice women's pleasure. We turn, then, to the substantial but understudied corpus referred to as 'Women's songs'. These are lyrics and verse spoken partially or entirely by women.[2] They disrupt the assumption that anti-feminist discourse was the sole conceptualisation of women's sexuality in later medieval England. In what follows, we are concerned particularly with those texts that contain explicit references to women's subjectivity, consent, and pleasure, whether fulfilled or frustrated.

Much of the early historiography of 'Women's songs' focuses on those categorised by Richard L. Greene in 1935 as 'Amorous carols'.[3] I therefore begin by introducing the competing theories around these texts and their production. Given so few of the texts can be attributed with any certainty, we must instead pay attention to evidence of multiple writers, additions, reproductions, and reception. This subtly shifts our attention from authorship and copyists to the songs' content and the voices they seek to portray; a development in their study which encourages us to consider their performance and reception more carefully. Crucially, this allows us to think about women's sexual subjectivity without being short-circuited by the extended debate around the songs' origins. In Chapter Three, I consider producers and consumers in light of the interpretations and conclusions I reach here.[4]

Accessing women's pleasure via these texts requires careful and flexible close reading strategies. I first consider how scholars' analysis of 'Women's songs' has been informed by centring the dominant discourses we have explored in Chapter One. I then show that philological

[2] Despite issues of genre which will be explored at length, the shorthand 'Women's songs' is common and well established.
[3] EEC; R. H. Robbins, 'The Earliest Carols and the Franciscans', *Modern Language Notes* 53:4 (1938), 239-45; Plummer, 'The Woman's Song'; J. Rogers, 'Gender and Literate Culture of Late Medieval England' (PhD Thesis, McGill University, 1998); K. Palti, '"Synge we now alle and sum": A study of British Library, Sloane MS 2593; Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet e.1; and St John's College, Cambridge, MS S.54' (PhD Thesis, University College London, 2008).
[4] See below, Chapter Three, 192.

investigation enables us to view specific sex acts thought to have little or no expression in Middle English, or indeed in any late medieval texts outside of penitentials.[5] This method is important because it facilitates a different way of thinking about these texts. Instead of mining them for a supposed moral position, we can observe their lavish descriptions of sexual activity, and consider that there might be other ideas at work in them. Having established enunciations of women's pleasure, we can then begin to argue that there are also conversations about women's sexual subjectivity – that is, women as desiring subjects, not as passive 'done unto' objects – within 'Women's songs'.[6]

PRODUCTION, PERFORMANCE, AND MODERN ANTHOLOGIES

Over fifty 'Women's songs' concerned with illicit sexuality survive across a variety of manuscript forms. Initial scholarly attention to these songs was largely devoted to transcribing, glossing, and cataloguing. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, philologists such as Frederick James Furnivall sought to collect and categorise Middle English verse better to understand the development of the English language. Although Furnivall was well known even in his own time for inaccuracy, he was responsible for the first editions of a swathe of 'Women's songs', not least because he saw a need to pay attention to texts that were not religious or courtly, as he argued that lowly, bawdy humour was just as central to late medieval sensibilities.[7]

The next period of sustained attention to 'Women's songs' began with Richard L. Greene's *The Early English Carols* in 1935.[8] Middle English carols were characterised by Greene as popular in destination if not in origin. In *Early English Carols*, he set out a cogent argument for the

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[5] P. J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: the development of a sexual code, 550-1150* (Toronto, 1984); B. A. Barr, *The Pastoral Care of Women in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2008); T. O'Donnell, 'Cunnilingus in the Middle Ages and the Problem of Understanding Past Sex Lives', *Notches Blog* (2014), http://notchesblog.com/2014/07/29/cunnilingus-in-the-middle-ages-and-the-problem-of-understanding-past-sex-lives/, accessed 16/02/2020.

[6] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 5.

[7] See F. J. Furnivall's prefaces to his edited volumes, *Jyl of Brentford's Testament, by Robert Copland, Boke Prynter* (London. 1871); and with J. W. Hales, *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript: Loose and Humorous Songs* (London, 1867).

[8] EEC, 229-316.

treatment of carols as a single genre with a distinctive form and performance tradition. Suggesting that they were a conscious development from the French *carole*, associated in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century with round dances, Greene argued that these were popular tunes, meant to be sung and danced to in groups.[9] They are composed of uniform four-line stanzas, with a repeated burden that functions in the same way as a chorus. Twenty-eight (from a total of approximately five hundred) carols extant in manuscript were categorised by Greene as 'Amorous carols, refined and gross'.[10]

The diachronic account offered by Greene holds that the pre-existing tradition of popular carols developed by minstrels was subsequently appropriated by clerics in order to replace it with a church-sanctioned form; the upshot was that the word 'carol' began to adhere to its modern association with religious themes by the end of the fifteenth century.[11] The fourteenth-century *Red Book of Ossory* is perhaps the most convincing example. This is a collection of sacred lyrics in Latin, where each song is headed by the opening lines of secular lyrics as prompts for the tune. A memorandum explains that the Bishop of Ossory, Richard de Ledred (1317-60) composed the sacred songs for feast days so that his clergy would not sing the bawdy originals.[12] One lyric is voiced in Middle English by a woman, who mourns that she must put aside her lover to marry an old man:

> Alas hou shold y syng,
> Yloren is my playng.
> Hou shold y wiþ þat olde man,
> To leven and let my leman
> Swettist of al thinge.[13]
>
> [Alas, how should I sing,

[9] EEC, xvii.
[10] Ibid, ix.
[11] Ibid, xxiii.
[12] Dublin, Representative Church Body Library MS D11.1.2 [The Red Book of Ossory], fol. 70r; see also P. Wormald, 'Bede, *Beowulf* and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', in his *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early Christian Society and its Historian*, ed. S. Baxter (Oxford, 2006), 30-105, for similar anxieties in another context.
[13] 'Alas hou shold y synge', Dublin, Representative Church Body Library MS D11.1.2, fol. 71v; DIMEV 2091; EEC, xci.

Wasted are my laments,
What shall I do with that old man,
To leave and give up my lover,
Sweetest of all things.]

Greene's conclusions did not go without criticism. Rossell Hope Robbins (1938) argued that while carols may have *initially* been an oral tradition, there is scant manuscript evidence for minstrels as the developers of the form. Rather, from the early fourteenth century onwards they were solely clerical productions based on Latin hymns. By the fifteenth century this clerical context gave way to a widely attested popularity of both religious and secular carols. This reverses the direction of Greene's account. On the basis of three early manuscripts, Robbins posited that Franciscan friars in particular initiated the English popular carol, and continued to be their main producers while minstrels merely copied the form.[14] He concluded that the main tradition of the English carol 'was not vernacular, secular, and foreign; but Latin, religious, and native'.[15]

Authorship and origin, popular or ecclesiastical, thus looms large in the historiography. But it remains the case that, of the amorous carols voiced by women, not one can be definitively attached to the name of a particular known composer. The consistency of carol texts is certainly significant, but before we accept Greene's emphasis on their formal qualities, there are some important questions to consider: does a consistency of form mean a consistency of usage? Of reception? In other words, would a medieval audience have recognised these songs as carols, and in what contexts would they have been heard or seen? This is particularly important when the picture is further complicated by the likelihood of many levels of contribution. The author-centred paradigm that has dominated analysis of these texts until the last few decades has the attendant implication that copyists and readers, let alone singers, are potential sources of contamination, rather than participants in the creation of the texts that have come down to us.[16] The to-and-fro

[14] Robbins, 'The Earliest Carols', 245.
[15] R. H. Robbins, 'Middle English Carols as Processional Hymns', *Studies in Philology* 56 (1959), 559-82, at 582.
[16] L. Finke, *Women's Writing in English: Medieval England* (London, 1999), 72.

arguments for the carols' production by either minstrels or churchmen betrays a view of these groups as 'ancient enemies', a perspective that Christopher Page views as unwary of the artificial boundaries created by the binary of 'lay' and 'clerical'.[17]

John F. Plummer (1981) was the first scholar to suggest a move away from carols and their form and origins. Instead, he drew together Middle English songs with continental precursors to argue for a cohesive genre he called 'the Woman's song', which has been adopted by scholars since as 'Women's song'.[18] This allowed for the grouping of different lyric forms that nonetheless address the same themes, with the recognition that these lyrics further had alternative functions and meanings that do not necessarily adhere to Greene or Robbins' formal prescriptions, although Plummer still viewed them as being purely the product of an educated elite at the expense of the women they portray.[19] He presumed the 'authentic' speaker behind the characters invoked in the lyrics to be male.[20] As we shall see, the texts certainly do operate in a comic register, but Plummer's discounting of female authorship on the grounds that the female persona is 'rather too well evoked' is unsophisticated.[21] Scholars have since made the case for women's participation in the lyric tradition with particular reference to carols, refusing the equation of 'anonymous' with 'male'.[22] The vast majority of lyrics that scholars have argued are likely to be written by women are indeed anonymous.[23] As such, we might approach these texts with attention to the possibility that their composers were not, necessarily, solely male.

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17 C. Page, *The Owl and the Nightingale: Musical Life and Ideas in France, 1100-1300* (London, 1989), 110.
18 J. Plummer, 'The Woman's Song in Middle English and its European Backgrounds', *Vox Feminae: Studies in Medieval Women's Songs*, ed. J. Plummer (Kalamazoo, 1981), 135-54.
19 Plummer, 'The Woman's Song', 144.
20 S. McNamer, 'Female Authors, Provincial Settings: The Re-Versing of Courtly Love in the Findern Manuscript', *Viator* 22 (1991), 279-310, at 286.
21 Plummer, 'The Woman's Song', 150.
22 Klinck; Palti, 'Synge we now alle and sum', 250-1, 44; *Women's Writing in Middle English: an Annotated Anthology*, ed. A. Barratt, 3rd edn. (Abindon, 2013), 16-21.
23 The three fifteenth-century exceptions, which are explicitly attributed to women, are discussed in McNamer, 'Lyrics and Romances', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge, 2003), 195-209, at 195. They are examples of elevated verse written by a queen, an anchoress, and a duchess. The latter is a sophisticated macaronic verse in praise of the Virgin. McNamer numbers the total of likely female-authored lyrics (in a variety of forms) extant in Middle English at around thirty.

'Women's songs' were popular with a range of fourteenth- to sixteenth-century people. The sheer range of manuscript type, perhaps most particularly their potential for 'mainstream' commercial value as attested by Richard Kele's 1550 printed edition, suggests a wide audience for 'Women's songs'.[24] This range has produced various interpretations of how and for what purpose the songs were consumed. In Chapter Three, we will consider in detail the context, readership, and transmission of 'Women's songs'. Here, I seek only to provide broad indications of the kinds of manuscripts we find songs texts in, with reference to a few key examples.

Commonplace and household books are one place where we find lyrics, from scraps of verse in the margins to complete song texts. The late fifteenth-century Findern anthology is perhaps the most famous example of a miscellany which includes about a dozen 'Women's songs' which were written, and probably composed, by women.[25] The commonplace book of Richard Hall gathers songs and prose that reflect a set of ideas about the responsibilities and conduct of his household.[26] Others have no such rationale: in San Marino, CA, Huntington Library MS EL 34.B.60, the song *O lord so swett Ser John dothe kys* is squeezed into a volume mostly dedicated to land tenures.[27] In Cambridge, Gonville & Caius Cambridge MS 383, three 'Women's songs' appear amongst music, several other lyrics, French and Latin exemplar letters, and grammatical notes. It provides a useful contrast to anthologised manuscripts, demonstrating that lyrics were not only recorded according to genre principles.[28]

The positioning of 'Women's songs' within manuscripts can create context for how they might be interpreted, and draw attention to the distinctions we make as historians between clerical

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[24] San Marino, CA., Henry Huntington Library, Christmas carolles newely Imprynted (Richard Kele) [STC 5204.5, *Christmas carolles newely Imprynted*].
[25] Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.16; For commentary, see McNamer, 'Female Authors, Provincial Settings'.
[26] Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6.
[27] San Marino, CA., Henry Huntington Library MS EL 34.B.60, f. 11.
[28] 'Al þis day ic han sought,' 'Ladd y þe dance a myssomur day,' and 'Alone i lyue alone (fragment),' Cambridge, Gonville & Caius College 383. p. 41; J. M. Bennett, 'Lesbian-Like and the Social History of Lesbianisms', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9:1/2 (2000), 1-24, at 6, n. 15.

and lay productions.[29] London, British Library Sloane MS 383 was owned by John Gysborne, canon of Coverham, Yorkshire, in the first half of the sixteenth century, and contains 'Women's songs' in what appears to be a pastoral context. But elsewhere, their appearance is much more playful. In Cambridge, University Library Additional MS 7350, the lyric *There was a friar of order gray* – referring to the grey habit worn by the Franciscan order – is preceded by two lyrics by the Franciscan James Ryman, with religious subject matter and burdens drawn from the Latin liturgy.[30] It seems reasonable to suggest that the positioning of this (as we shall see) sexually charged text was intended as a satirical comment on Ryman's lyrics.

Cambridge, St John's College MS S.54, dating from the second half of the fifteenth century, is one of the very few manuscripts containing 'Women's songs' that contains lyrics, and nothing else.[31] It is preserved in a contemporary protective wrapping and as such was potentially intended to travel – indeed, Greene describes it as a 'pocket-book of carols'.[32] It contains some twenty songs, and frames the so-called 'lament' of a woman seduced and left pregnant, *Þis enper day I mete a clerke*, placed between two songs in praise of virgins. The manuscript is the work of two scribes, both anonymous.[33] Kathleen Palti has tentatively suggested that Scribe B, in whose uncertain hand these songs are written, could be a woman. Less speculatively, this anthology attests to how songs could have been viewed or heard: together they may have formed a cycle providing aspirational and/or warning examples, perhaps for an audience that included women.[34]

PERFORMING 'WOMEN'S SONGS'

Another consequence of the author-centred paradigm has been that less consideration has been given to the effects of performance, and the spaces in which 'Women's songs' were sung and

[29] Harris, 'Gender, Voice, and Desire in the Lyrics of Bodleian MS Ashmole 176', 31-2.
[30] Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Additional 7350, Part I, (Box 2), fol. ii.
[31] Cambridge, St John's College MS S.54.
[32] EEC, 325-6.
[33] D. Wakelin, 'The Carol in Writing: Three Anthologies from Fifteenth-Century Norfolk', *Journal of the Early Book Society* 9 (New York, 2006), 25-50, at 31.
[34] Palti, 'Synge we now alle and sum', 180.

heard. Turning our attention to this aspect allows us to consider how women could contribute to their musical tradition.

The richest sources of references for women's musical performance are literary. Women are frequently depicted as participating in carolling: for example, in the anonymous thirteenth-century *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, 'Damisels carols ledeþ', and in *Piers Plowman*, 'damyseles' carol 'Til the day dawed'.[35] When Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman describes a canon's eagerness to obtain an alchemical recipe, carolling, women, and lusting appear in the same breath among the comparisons:

> Was nevere noon that luste bet to synge
> Ne lady lustier in carolynge.[36]
>
> [Never was one that desired more to sing
> Nor a lady more eager in carolling].

The relationship between 'Women's songs' and literary representations of women's performance is not without its problems, but Judith Tick has pointed to literary references as evidence of the ubiquitous presence of women in late medieval musical culture, with the lack of female attribution operating as circumstantial evidence that 'shifts the burden of proof away from assumptions of exclusion towards more sophisticated interpretations'.[37] Although some scholars have suggested it is unlikely that women publicly sang bawdy lyrics, nine of the lyrics discussed here have been transmitted with their music, written for multiple voices which could conceivably have included women.[38]

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[35] *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ed. O. D. Macrae-Gibson (2 vols, London, 1973), i, 127, l. 1714; W. Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London, 1978), 325, Bk. XVIII, l. 427.
[36] G. Chaucer, 'Canon's Yeoman's Tale', *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L. D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1988), 280, ll. 1344-5.
[37] J. Tick, 'Women in Music', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie (29 vols., London, 2001), xxvii, 519-542, at 524.
[38] Plummer, 'The Woman's Song', 150; Around 120 carols in total are found in fifteenth-century manuscripts with their musical settings. See Stevens, *Medieval Carols* (London, 1958), xiv-xv. Two of the notated manuscripts discussed here have links to the Tudor court; here at least, we can say for certain that women sang, as they appear in account books. For example, in 1495, a group of women were paid for singing before the King and Queen, and another woman for singing with a fiddle. See W. Chapell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time; a Collection of Ancient Songs, Ballads, and Dance Tunes, Illustrative of the National Music of England* (London, 1859), 49.

A second potential avenue of participation was through dancing. In Lydgate's *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, a minstrel who makes his audiences forget their creator boasts of his talents: 'I kan karole wel, and daunce'.[39] The connection between carols and dancing is striking, but ambiguous. We can somewhat delineate through the musical 'carol', and the dance form of the '*carole*', although in actuality these overlap. *Carole* choreography is far from clear, but it is widely accepted that they were a kind of round-dance where a soloist sings the stanzas while leading the dance in a circle. The other dancers also form a chorus for the burden, which is sung standing still. There is no evidence to connect any 'Women's song' to a specific performance context; that said, Seeta Chaganti has explored the ways in which some of the songs hint at the round-dance form, or dancing contexts. Although this does not mean they were intended to be danced to *per se*, the reader or listener might use dance as a point of reference, and notice how the dancers literally and figuratively 'mis-step'.[40] Further, four of the songs make reference to feast days: at a minimum, the internal world of the songs invokes a context where they were sung and danced to.

Evidence for dancing and singing as connected activities lastly comes in the form of the moral condemnation of carolling. The Dominican friar John Bromyard recorded a story in his popular mid-fourteenth-century manual for preachers, the *Summa predicantium*, that described a city populace 'in a state of the greatest dissoluteness, that is to say dancing *caroles*'.[41] This reveals something of the perceived link between *caroles* and public sexual misconduct.[42] Around the same time, in the *Form of Perfect Living*, Richard Rolle distinguishes between singing 'seculere sanges' as a sin of the mouth, and 'to lede karols' as a sin of deed, demonstrating that a 'carol' was thought of as a dance – perhaps even more than it was a song – but both were certainly sinful.[43] A mid-

[39] J. Lydgate, *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London, 1901), ll. 21529-30.
[40] S. Chaganti, *Strange Footing: Poetic Form and Dance in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago, 2018), 84-93.
[41] Page, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 113, my emphasis; For an overview of representation of women in the *Summa predicantium*, see R. Mazo Karras, 'Gendered Sin and Misogyny in John of Bromyard's *Summa Predicantium*', *Traditio* 47 (1992), 233-257.
[42] For wider European critique of women who dance *caroles*, see Page, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 110-117.
[43] R. Rolle, 'The Form of Perfect Living', in *The Form of Perfect Living and Other Prose Treatises*, ed. G. E. Hodgson (London, 1910), Ch. VI, ll. 33-4.

fifteenth-century confessors' manual records that, concerning lust, the confessor was to '[Enquire whether the penitent] will have taken part in *caroles* much, or in spectacles of this kind'.[44] In *Handlyng Synne*, Robert Mannyng accuses women of borrowing each other's clothes and getting dressed up to go carolling.[45]

In thinking about production and performance, then, we can make some tentative conclusions. Questions of origin only get us so far in understanding what these songs meant for the people who interacted with them. Regardless of where they began, what is clear from the extant manuscripts is that by the fifteenth century they were produced and reproduced in a wide range of contexts. In Chapter One, we saw complaints about women singing love songs and carolling, even to the point where it was something deemed worthy of specific confession.[46] Such evidence as we have is fragmentary, but supports the view that women may well have heard and performed some of these lyrics, or other songs like them. As we shall see, some of the songs even invoke an imagined audience.

Interpreting 'Women's Songs'

Keeping performance in mind is important as we turn to how the songs would have been interpreted by their audiences. The 'voice' of the lyrics creates the impression that a first-person narrative offers intimate access to a past perspective. We are far more alert now to authorship as a slippery concept, where 'the "I" who speaks is often someone else'.[47] But the basic point to keep in mind is that 'voice' is not synonymous with 'experience'. 'Women's songs' are multi-layered and multivocal, even if they are presented as personal. The collaborative nature of voicing, where

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[44] Page, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 120.
[45] Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, 120, ll. 3457-60.
[46] See above, Chapter One, 46-7.
[47] F. E. Dolan, *True Relations: Reading, Literature and Evidence in Seventeenth Century England* (Philadelphia, 2013), 117; See also S. Marnette, 'A Sociolinguistic and Literary Analysis of Female Discourse in the Fabliaux: A Working Paper', in *On Linguistic Change in French: Socio-Historical Approaches; Studies in Honour of R. Anthony Lodge*, eds. D. Lagorgette and T. Pooley (Chambery, 2011), 129-151; eadem, 'Forms and Functions of Reported Discourse in Medieval French', in *Research on Old French: the State of the Art,* ed. D. Arteaga (Dordrecht, 2013), 299-326.

writing, copying, speaking, performing, reading, and listening all contribute, creates a deep instability in our texts as to what message we are supposed to take from them. This enables the texts to be understood in different ways at different times, or by different people at the same time – or indeed by the same people at different times. Shades of meaning might become more or less prominent depending on the performance and context.

Scholars have dealt with this unstable 'I' in a variety of ways. Plummer viewed 'Women's songs' as ironic, 'unsympathetic' voicings by men at the expense of the women they 'stereotyped', intended to be read in the same spirit as French *fabliaux*.[48] This continues to be a common lens through which the lyrics are viewed. In 2019, Anne L. Klink found that:

> The artless, desiring, vulnerable femininity depicted in so many of them looks […] more like the product of male wishes and fantasies than a reflection of *essential* femininity, or of female authorship in the case of the anonymous poems.[49]

Certainly we need not accept that the gender of persona and author are the same, but the overwhelming assumption by historians that a well-developed, ironic voice must reinforce misogyny short-circuits an interpretation which acknowledges that women might subjectively interact with the songs. Indeed, scholarship has made some serious headway in imaginatively engaging with the potential voices within the 'I'. In a close reading of two 'laments', Neil Cartlidge (1998) laid the groundwork for reading multiple concerns within 'Women's songs'. He argues that the lyrics testified to late-medieval anxieties around extra-marital pregnancy, but the very double-entendre that Plummer cited as evidence of their male perspective in fact had the potential to subversively celebrate women's sexuality.[50]

There has since been further movement towards explanations of 'Women's songs' that take women's motivations into account. Janelle Werner (2002) highlights the striking use of market

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[48] Plummer, 'The Woman's Song', 143, 146; However it is worth noting that the fabliaux themselves have themselves been explored for a range of potential gendered readings. See Burns, *Bodytalk*, 46-8.
[49] *The Voices of Medieval Lyric: An Anthology of Poems ca.1150-1530* ed. A. L. Klinck (Montreal, 2019), 233; My italics.
[50] N. Cartlidge, "'Alas, I go with chylde": Representations of Extra-Marital Pregnancy in the Middle English Lyric', *English Studies* 79:5, (1998), 395-414, at 411.

trade metaphors within the genre to suggest that they were indicative of women taking advantage of a sexual economy, in which their sexuality could be utilised to gain favours, gifts, or secure marriage.[51] Judith Bennett (2002) takes this idea further, using Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of 'bargaining with patriarchy' to argue that lyrics centring on young, single, servant women appeal to a male fantasy, but simultaneously 'repeat and [do] not repeat' misogynist ideas.[52] Women, she argues, saw their sexuality as having transactional potential. This was especially pronounced for economically marginal singlewomen, who might engage in occasional sex work or sex in return for shelter or goods in kind. The corpus' focus on singlewomen is inextricably linked to the latter's heightened sexualisation and the surveillance of that group over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as we explored in Chapter One.[53] This makes Bennett cautious of whose voice we might be hearing. As singlewomen were carried further from their natal families in search of work, Bennett asserts that the practice of bawdy singing enabled mother-daughter education at a remove, teaching young women away from home what the social consequences of illicit encounters might entail.[54] Even more recently, Carissa Harris has made convincing arguments for viewing the lyrics as a pedagogy of a different kind: explicit sexual content could perform a peer-to-peer teaching function whereby women similarly outside of familial protection (or barriers) might warn each other of the dangers of illicit encounters, all the while emphasising the possibility of mutually pleasurable outcomes.[55]

We have reached a point, then, where doubleness and teaching/warning are structured into our readings of 'Women's songs'. Taking these insights further, it is worth questioning where the presence of such a genre leaves our reading of late medieval understandings of sexuality. The voices of women in these texts can potentially be understood as presenting sex from their point

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[51] J. Werner, 'Romance and Finance: Courtship, Commerce, and Female Sexuality in Late Medieval England' (MA Thesis, University of North Carolina, 2002).
[52] Bennett, 'Ventriloquisms', 202, 190; D. Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Gender and Society* 2 (1988), 274-90.
[53] See above, Chapter One, 60.
[54] Bennett, 'Ventriloquisms', 191-4.
[55] Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 151.

of view. Even while they might represent elements of a misogynist culture, a wide range of collaboratively produced texts make the choice to talk about sexual pleasure through women speakers. As such, 'Women's songs' afforded a space in which to explore the scripts available to women as sexual subjects. Further, there are texts whose origins may have been linked to men or women (or both in collaboration), but which could be read and reread in multiple ways. We are presented, then, with a corpus for which there are few certainties and many possibilities. Such a corpus lends itself to a range of analytical frameworks, and now we turn to those.

Accessing Sexual Subjectivity in 'Women's Songs'

Thus far we have considered the implications of variously interpreting the origins, contexts, and voices of 'Women's songs'. The treatments by Cartlidge, Werner, Bennett, and Harris encourage us towards readings where lyrics can simultaneously speak for and against dominant discourse. To this, we now add a third layer of interpretation, where – building on the analysis in the previous chapter – we must reckon with our own positioning as readers. As we have seen, we operate within a paradigm that tends to commute dominant discourse into the *only* discourse. The dominant patriarchal misogynistic discourse appears to tell us that women cannot think, and can be reduced to their bodies. Scholars either take this as the only outlook, or instead speak of unreachability. This constraint is fairly easily overcome by simply viewing women as subjects, as Bennett and others since have done. But there is a far more complicated constraint: that is, how easily we fall into imposing dominant discourses of the types seen in Chapter One onto the very act of reading and analysing texts that have the potential to tell us something different. Throughout this chapter, I draw attention to how significantly our assumptions about dominant discourse shapes our reading.

Two historians' approaches in particular guide my thinking in accessing sexual subjectivity. John Arnold has emphasised the problem facing historians of simultaneously avoiding both the

silencing and the colonisation of the subaltern voice. Taking legal records as his central source, he requires us to consider our own position:

> One can (and should) read the constructed subject(s) of the multiple discourses [of inquisition records] as possessing a degree of agency constructed within these discourses; confession, in particular, depends upon a constructed subject who is self-reflexive and autonomous, confessing 'spontaneously' on the subject of his or her own self. So the confession is itself another *poesis,* a moment of self-making. The heteroglossic nature of the records leads to conflicts, oppositions and ruptures in the text; the subject speaks within competing discourses. So the ethical response of the historian to these sources is surely to provide a critical and effective reading of these ruptures, which will have the source speak against itself, against its own constraints.[56]

The voices of 'Women's songs' are certainly not analogous with those of inquisitorial records; they are considerably less tangible and a good deal more complicated in their framing. But the subjectivity that I seek to recover is undoubtedly subaltern. Arnold's point, that we must try as much as we can to centre ruptures, helps us to avoid the trap of reading 'Women's songs' as simply a confirmation and/or rejection of dominant discourse, and look with precision at the conflicts within the texts as potential moments of agency.

Meanwhile, in her study of late-medieval household games, Nicola McDonald argues that even if games were produced within a rhetorical formula of misogyny, women do not necessarily have to be considered as complicit in their own oppression. In erotically charged social card and word games played by both men and women, such as *Chaunce of Dice* and *Have Your Desire*, there were opportunities at once to mock and manipulate.[57] Indeed, often the aim in games that include innuendo is to provoke inversion of the explicit rhetoric.[58] Further, the prompts in *Have Your Desire* rarely speak of deeds done, instead largely occupying the realm of fantasy. One combination reveals that 'you sal haue yi dissir yat is in yi thoght' [you shall have your desire that is in your

[56] J. Arnold, 'The Historian as Inquisitor: The Ethics of Interrogating Subaltern Voices', *Rethinking History* 2:3 (1998), 379-386, at 384.
[57] McDonald, 'Fragments of *(Have Your) Desire*', 233.
[58] Ibid., 243-4.

thought], while another insists on the expansiveness of desire: '[y]at you der nauther spek no luk, bot yhaht is fre' [that you dare neither to speak nor look, but thought is free].[59]

Chaunce of Dice was more sexually explicit, where the entertainment and humour relied on the overtness of the play. But McDonald identifies something more quietly revolutionary in *Have Your Desire*. It centred thought, will, heart, and intention as important elements of sexuality, as much as any act. She concludes that a gendered approach to the pastime 'invites *us* to position women…as desiring subjects', as players were prompted to reveal their desires in a form of confession outside of conventional regulatory practice.[60] It is also a space where they had the opportunity to think about what was attractive and desirable in a situation which did not involve their bodies. In this way, we can begin from a position where women might express subjectivity, and not simply to confirm or deny the systematic constraints around their speaking.

We cannot know with any finality who wrote the majority of 'Women's songs', but we can see many layers of voice in them, dominant discourse being one strand, but only one among voices that express pleasure, subjectivity, gaze, joy in the self, and a clear conceptualisation of consent. We can attend to these voices over those commonly given primacy; indeed, the resulting readings are often better warranted than those previously accepted.

Sex Acts in Middle English

It is argued that sex acts intended for women's pleasure are rarely enunciated in Middle English, or indeed in any medieval context.[61] However, modern translators, editors, and commentators have an active choice in this process. Many 'Women's songs' use words that do not have a definition in the *Middle English Dictionary*. This is partly because the *MED* is based largely on 'canon' texts – Chaucer, Langland, Lydgate, and so on – but it also reflects the difficulty of ascertaining

[59] W. L. Braekman, 'Fortune-Telling by the Casting of Dice: A Middle English Poem and its Background', *Neophilologica* 52:1 (1980), 3-29, at 18, 22.
[60] McDonald, 'Fragments of *(Have Your) Desire*', 258, emphasis mine.
[61] R. Greentree, 'Lyric', *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture, c.1350-c.1500*, ed. P. Brown (Oxford, 2009), 387-405, at 399.

whether or not a term has a sexual dimension. There is further a significant amount of material that scholars have not really taken the time to understand – perhaps because it is anonymous, and about sex, and about women enjoying sex on their own terms. Thus a closed circle is formed: the words are unimportant because they are not in important literature, and the literature is unimportant because it is garbled nonsense about women that we cannot understand because it does not use words the way Chaucer used them.

My response is to read these texts, and read them queerly. In his *Queer Philologies*, Jeffrey Masten suggests that the study of historical sex and gender 'is necessarily a *philological* investigation…a detailed study of the terms and related rhetorics that early modern English culture used to inscribe bodies, pleasures, affects [and] sexual acts'.[62] The 'Queer' of Masten's title is his historical subject. He tracks representations of queer sexuality through, for instance, the homoerotic coding of 'prick' and 'tail'. But queering also refers to opening out multiple meanings, and resistance to foreclosure. If philology seeks to retrace definitions and understand them in their historical context, queer philology practices this study while refusing to stabilise one meaning as dominant. A text could (contemporaneously) mean many things to different people at different levels of engagement.

Queer philology can just as readily be applied to Middle English. We can read words in a way that well-known authors would not necessarily have used them, but that other readers and writers of the fifteenth century demonstrably did. And sometimes, by decentring what we think we know, we start to see that there was a clear and widely used sense – something central – that we have missed by branding it peripheral. Queer philology dismantles this central-periphery binary.

Let us look at an example: the verb 'basse'. The most famous instance of the word 'basse' (via its colloquial shortenings 'ba' and 'pa') is spoken by the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury*

[62] J. Masten, *Queer Philologies* (Philadelphia, 2016), 15.

Tales: 'Com neer, my spouse; lat me ba thy cheke'.[63] In this example, translators use 'kiss', with 'ba' indicating a diminutive and patronising sense. Sure enough, if we check the *MED* under 'ba', the definition is 'to kiss', and the example is from Chaucer. It comes up in a similar way in the Morality play *Mankind*, dated to the late 1460, where two allegorical figures, Mischief and New Gyse [Guise], argue. Mischief hits New Gyse in the balls with a spade. When New Gyse wails in pain, Mischief responds: 'A wher, Alake, Fayer babe, ba me!' [Oh wah, alack, fair baby, kiss me!].[64] Other writers also clearly mean a kiss when they use 'basse':

> Then of my mouth come take a basse,
> Fore oder goodes have I none.[65]
>
> [Then of my mouth come take a kiss,
> For other goods have I none.]
>
> Hit is the baisyers, yef to the lady it plese.[66]
>
> [It is [my] kisses, if it pleases the lady.]

The root of bass is the Old French 'baisier', 'to kiss'. A note in the *MED* suggests an expansion as regards object – it suggests that we may read a kiss 'of two people', or 'to kiss (the mouth)'. But in *fabliaux* and their contemporary texts it is also widely recognised that 'baisier' has the meaning 'to fuck'.[67] I do not think this strongest meaning straightforwardly commutes into Middle English, but let us consider a few more examples in their context.

For John Skelton, a 'ba' and a 'bas' are synonymous with a night in which a man forgets 'all deadly sin', after which the young woman rises early and leaves him sleeping to meet someone else.[68] Another early riser is expected to 'basse' his wife: one version of *Fyrst arysse erly*, a short

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[63] G. Chaucer, 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue', *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L. D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1988), 110, l. 433.
[64] *Mankind*, ed. K. M. Ashley and G. NeCastro (Kalamazoo, 2010), 26, l. 430
[65] c. 1400; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson C.258, fol. 26, cited in J. O. Halliwell, *A Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words, Obsolete Phrases, Proverbs, and Ancient Customs: from the Fourteenth Century* (2 vols., London, 1852), i, 147.
[66] *Merlin: or the early History of King Arthur: a prose romance*, ed. H. B. Wheatley (London, 1949), 323, ll. 7-8.
[67] DMF *baisier* 2 a4) *posséder charnellement*; this meaning endures in modern French.
[68] 'My Darling Dere, my Daysy Floure', ll. 8-11; EEC 310-11; DIMEV 3586; There is no extant MS version, but several authorities for the printed edition, STC 22604, Skelton, John, *Dyuers Balettys and Dyties Solacyous* [1528], fol. 1v. The publisher is uncertain, but John Rastell and Richard Pynson have both been suggested

conduct poem which gives husbands instructions for waking, working, and eating, ends with a precept for the end of the day.

> Goo to thy bed myrely
> And lye therin jocu[nd]ly
> And plesse and loffe thy wyffe dewly
> And basse hyr onys or tewyis myrely.[69]
>
> [Go to your bed merrily
> And lie therein joyfully
> And gratify and love your wife duly
> And kiss her once or twice merrily].

This intimate coital (or post-coital?) 'basse' follows having gratified his wife 'dewly': as is only right; as he should.

In Charles d'Orleans' (c.1440) *Fortunes Stabilness*, a *dit amoureux* composed in both French and English versions, the narrator nostalgically recalls the bed where he kissed his lover's breasts: 'here y baste hir fayre round pappis white'.[70] The 'basse' here is more than a kiss – it is more embodied, more sexualised. This could potentially be because d'Orleans was informed by the meaning in his native French. However, he was fluent in English due to his long captivity in England, and according to his friends, particularly well versed in English for the purposes of 'love talk'.[71]

The same sexualised meaning can also be found in a 'pa' in Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale'. When Absolon comes wooing, Alisoun the carpenter's wife sends him off: 'Go fro the wyndow, Iakke fool'.[72] Absolon will not leave, and she eventually invites him to kiss her: 'As help me god it wol nat be. Com pa me'.[73] But instead, Alisoun offers her 'naked ers' out the window. The word 'pa'

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as likely candidates. Both printers are discussed in Chapter Three. See also R. S. Kinsmen, 'The Printer and Date of Printing of Skelton's *Agaynste a Comely Coystrowne* and *Dyuers Balettys*', *HLQ* 16 (1953), 203-10; J. Scattergood, 'John Skelton's Lyrics: Tradition and Innovation', *Act*, 12 (1988, for 1985), 19.

[69] Transcription from McDonald, 'Fragments of *(Have Your) Desire*', 225.

[70] Charles d'Orleans, 'Fortunes Stabilness', in *Fortunes Stabilnes: Charles of Orleans's English Book of Love: a Critical Edition*, ed. M-J Arn, (Binghampton, 1994), 319, l. 4840.

[71] *Fortunes Stabilnes: Charles of Orleans's English Book of Love*, 29-30.

[72] Chaucer, 'The Miller's Tale', *The Riverside Chaucer*, 75, l. 3708.

[73] Ibid., l. 3709.

occurs only in the Ellesmere Chaucer. Harris has suggested that different scribes of the *Canterbury Tales* variously played up or down the potential for sexual explicitness - what she calls obscenities.[74] What could it mean, that for one scribe at least, that this 'kiss' is a 'pa'?

A final 'ba' appears in a mixture of Latin prose and Middle English verse in the fourteenth-century cleric's notebook, Leicester Record Office MS 6D32/2, in a cautionary tale of a father and son who fall in love and know each other carnally. The son falls ill, and dies knowing that he is bound for hell. Yet the last comment, a single macaronic rhyming couplet, leaves much room for interpretation:

> Mater! Quid fili? peto te, dulsissima, ba, ba
> O pater! o fili! Mihi placet oscula, da da[75]
>
> [Mother! What, my son? I beg you, sweetest, kiss, kiss
> O father! O son! I like kisses, give give]

This 'ba', given all that has come before, holds in it all the associations of incestuous abuse. Even more extraordinarily, this couplet re-emerges almost two centuries later in a carol in praise of the Virgin by the Tudor court composer Richard Pygott, which imagines Mary cooing baby-speak to the Christ child:

> Quid petis, o fily[sic]
> Mater dulcissima ba ba
> Quid petis, o fili?
> Michi plausus oscula da da[76]
> [What do you ask for, oh son?
> Sweetest mother, kiss kiss
> What do you ask for, oh son?
> I clap[77] kisses, give give]

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[74] C. Harris, 'Inserting "A grete tente, a thrifty, and a long": Sexual Obscenity and Scribal Innovation in Fifteenth-Century Manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*', in *Essays in Medieval Studies* 27 (2011), 45-60.
[75] Leicester Record Office MS 6D32/2, p. 42b; DIMEV 782.8; This scribe makes numerous spelling and grammatic errors which are also extant in other versions of the lyric, but more pronounced here.
[76] London, British Library MS Additional 31922; Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, 421. Stevens notes the similarity with a further fourteenth century survival, inside the cover of Cambridge, Peterhouse MS 195, where only this chorus is copied, albeit closer in form to our earlier lyric as it includes 'O pater, o fili'. Although not the focus here, clearly a version of this lyric was circulating long before its nativity makeover. See DIMEV 5414 for these MSS.
[77] L. P. Austern, 'Women's Musical Voices in Sixteenth-Century England', *Early Modern Women* 3 (2008), 127-152, at 134, views the garbled Latin as 'imitation babytalk'; this is certainly true, and I have approximated the meaning.

This later carol has been the topic of much historical study, but the parallel with the earlier lyric has never been noted.[78]

The connotations of 'basse' often reach beyond a kiss therefore. But if we start with the mocking kiss on the cheek in Chaucer, the embodied potential is somewhat lost. A 'basse' can be on the cheek, or the mouth – but also on 'pappis' or the 'ers', between people already engaged in a sexual relationship, or soon to be. One reading of 'basse' may be 'embrace' – an essentially innocent meaning, but patterns of use which can imply a movement between stages of sexual contact. It is this method of reading that we can carry through to 'Women's songs'. By being attentive to the sexual possibilities of the word choices, and tackling them explicitly, we can explore the full range of meanings that medieval readers could draw from them.

ARTICULATING PLEASURE IN 'WOMEN'S SONGS'

Middle English did not lack the words for sex acts intended to be pleasurable for women. To correctly identify and understand them, however, attentiveness to ranges of meaning and wordplay – what Cixous referred to as 'fullness' – is vital as we turn to techniques and images for articulating pleasure in 'Women's songs'.[79]

In his discussion of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 48, a mid-sixteenth-century collection of seventy-six lyrics, Andrew Taylor identifies only two songs that are 'at all risqué'.[80] Neither of these is *I have bene a meadene so longe*, in which the reader is witness to unfulfilled desires that, while still orientated around heterosexual penetrative sex, are sincerely expressed, and draw

[78] Nicholas Orme discusses the later lyric in his *Medieval Children* (New Haven, 2001), 130.
[79] See above, Introduction, 22.
[80] A. Taylor, *The Songs and Travels of a Tudor Minstrel: Richard Sheale of Tamworth* (2012), 85; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 48 is a collection of ballads and broadsides copied from various printed and written sources in a variety of hands. The central section by the most prominent hand was likely compiled c.1556-8, with later additions.

attention to women's masturbatory practice and tactile metaphorical foreplay.[81] This song and ten others of the collection are attributed to John Wallace, whose poetic style, in particular his archaic vocabulary and dependence on alliteration, points to a much earlier composition date than their compilation in this manuscript.[82] The speaker, a servant, complains that she has not yet lost her virginity, fearing in the refrain that soon 'my tyme wyll be paste'.[83] Her frustration is such that:

> Bothe day and nyght it ys my mynde,
> To jebarde ethar to mare ore make[84]
>
> [Both day and night it is on my mind,
> To expose[85] [myself] either to [my] ruin or making [lit. to mar or make]

The second line can also be read as a pun, where the speaker takes a risk with a potential suitor, as in the lyric immediately preceding this one in the manuscript, attributed to the same author, 'mayke' is used in the sense of a lover or husband.[86]

Despite this willingness to engage in sexual activity whether or not the result is matrimony, it bears emphasis that this is not the kind of compulsive excess described by Lydgate.[87] The speaker is clear that she is a virgin, challenging the perception that loss of virginal status is the watershed moment after which women are sexually awakened and indeed at the mercy of their carnal appetites. There are also limits as to whom she will consider: she has evidently already refused one man on account of his beard, and is clear that a potential partner cannot be 'of [her] kyn'.[88] There is further a specific object of her desire: 'Good Robyne Brucke holl, wold God thowe wear hear'.[89] Robin's surname – literally 'breach-hole' – emphasises the penetrative focus of the speaker's

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[81] 'I have bene a meadene so longe', Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 48, fols. 81-83r; *Songs and Ballads, With Other Short Poems, Chiefly of the Reign of Philip and Mary*, ed. T. Wright (London, 1860), 133-6; with thanks to Judith Bennett for drawing my attention to this text.
[82] H. E. Rollins, 'Concerning Bodleian Ms. 48', *Modern Language Notes* 34:6 (1919), 340-51, at 350; Michael Chesnutt argues that the archaisms may in fact be 'Scotticisms' in his 'Minstrel Poetry', 85.
[83] 'I have bene a meadene so longe', l. 8.
[84] Ibid, ll. 9-10.
[85] MED juparten v. 1(a) To risk (one's life, one's body), expose (oneself) to danger.
[86] *Songs and Ballads, With Other Short Poems, Chiefly of the Reign of Philip and Mary*, ed. T. Wright (London, 1860), 132.
[87] See above, Chapter One, 42.
[88] 'I have bene a meadene so long', ll. 57-62.
[89] Ibid, l. 18.

desire.[90] It also playfully undercuts a reading in which the speaker is interested in using sex as a route to marriage, as she is evidently aware of his reputation.

However, Robin is less forthcoming than his name would suggest. The speaker, in her attempts to gain private access to her lover, encourages the male character to drink at her expense:

> When we mett at the merkyte, at the syne of the gose,
> Ther we drank the wyn as rede as any bloode,
> & wear glade we wer myrry when we wear well apayde,
> Lorde howe he coste me bothe cheak and chin.[91]
>
> [When we met at the market, at the sign of the goose[92],
> There we drank the wine as red as any blood[93],
> And were glad we were merry[94], when we were fully satisfied,
> Lord, how he kissed[95] me, both cheek and chin.]

The speaker's reference to the abundant kisses on 'bothe cheak and chin' may also be a subversion of a stereotype found elsewhere. It is used by John Gower in *Confessio Amantis*, in reference to Apame the courtesan, and her manipulation of Cyrus the Great:

> [And with only hire goodly lok
> Sche made him debonaire and meke,
> And be the chyn and be the cheke
> Sche luggeth him riht as hir liste[96]
> [And with only a courteous/friendly look,

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[90] See MED, brouken v. 1(a) To enjoy; take (one's) pleasure in (a woman). Related to 'bruche' n. 1(a) a breach or 2(b) loss of virginity; MED, hole n.2, 2(a) an external bodily orifice; the anus, the orifice of the female pudendum [vulva].

[91] 'I have bene a meadene so long', ll .67-70.

[92] The reference to the 'sign of the goose' potentially suggests a house of ill repute, as in the famous 'Winchester geese', for which see P. G. Brewster, 'A Note on the "Winchester Goose" and Kindred Topics', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 13:4 (1958), 483-491. The goose could also have the more usual Middle English associations of gossiping and foolishness. There is no evidence for connecting this to 'goosing' in the sense of the modern innuendo.

[93] A reference to the 'Cherry-Tree Carol', in which the Virgin craves a cherry 'red as any blood' because she is pregnant. P. L. Royston, '"The Cherry-Tree Carol": its Sources and Analogues', *Folklore Forum* 15:1 (1982), 1-16.

[94] 'Myrry', as in the lyric for husbands above at n. 75, carries connotations of sexual enjoyment.

[95] This may also be a pun on 'cost' (MED costen v.), either in a literal or more figurative sense.

[96] J. Gower, 'Confessio Amantis', in *The English Works of John Gower* ed. G. C. Macaulay (2 vols., 1900-1901), Bk.7, ll. 1890-93; In one women-voiced complaint about erectile dysfunction, 'Leve, lystynes to me', a wife describes her attempts to help her husband to an erection: 'I *lyrke* hym up with my hond/ and pray him that he wyll stond' [I pull/tug him up with my hand/ and beg him that he will stand]. Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales MS Brogyntyn ii.I fols. 56v-59v, DIMEV 3073; *Jyl of Breyntfords Testament, by Robert Copland, Boke-Prynter, The Wyll of the Devil and his Last Testament, A Talk of Ten Wives on their Husbands' Ware, A Balade or two by Chaucer, And Other Short Pieces*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London, 1871), 29-33.

She made him mild and meek,
And by the chin and by the cheek
She led him exactly as she wanted].

Gower's use of 'luggeth' here may well have a sexual connotation. The meaning of this is made literal in at least one retelling of the Apame story in a near-contemporary (c.1430-50) Catalonian manuscript of *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, where the courtesan holds the King (here Darius, as in the apocryphal Esdras telling) by his chin and cheek while he reaches to lift her skirt (Figure 1).[97]



Figure 1: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 204, fol. 21r

[97] KJB 1 Edras 4.29; The scribe and illuminator of this MS, Laurentius Dyamas, also made at least one manuscript for an English Bishop, for which see Oxford, Balliol College MS 238E.

In this instance, a man is led every which way by a wily woman.[98] In our lyric, however, it is the fictive woman who is helpless when faced with wiles of Robin, who can lead *her* wherever *he* pleases.

There is also some indication that her courtship is unusual in its lack of penetrative sex: the speaker names another 'wonderous propar' couple, Wyll Gregge and Jone Gale, who despite being younger in years are further along in their physical relationship.[99] It seems that they too are unmarried, as they, like the speaker and Robin, must resort to meeting in alehouses.[100]

The speaker's narrative is laced with innuendo. The ultimate goal is to lose her maidenhead, and the speaker also places emphasis on various kinds of touch and forms of play. The couple's daily labours become a further site of tactile sexual imagination, as the speaker's milking and Robin's bell-ringing offer opportunities for fantasies of foreplay:

> When I syte in the felde my cowe mylkynge,
> I am as myrry as any wence can bye,
> I knowe as well when Robyn dothe rynge,
> As ife I wear ther in his companye.[101]
>
> [When I sit in the field milking my cow,
> I am as merry as any wench can be,
> I know as well when Robin does ring (the church bells),
> As if I was there in his company.]

Although the speaker really is milking a cow, the action makes her think of pulling on something else, demonstrating that – though a virgin – she knows about the male body and what one might do with it.[102] Moreover, she can fantasise about what she might expect in return, as 'ringing the bell' was a common euphemism for orgasm.[103] Songs, then, used euphemism and metaphors to describe sex acts. Let us look at some other examples.

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[98] *My Darling Dere, my Daysy Floure*, also contains this phrase 'With ba ba ba and bas bas bas/ She cheryshed hym both cheke and chyn'. See Chapter Two, 106, n. 69.
[99] 'I have bene a meadene so longe', ll. 52-4.
[100] Ibid, l. 50.
[101] Ibid, ll. 41-4.
[102] Similar tactile imagery, but with more frustration than excitement, can be found in 'Leve, lystenes to me', DIMEV 3073.
[103] EEC, 490; Klinck, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric*, 342, 353.

It was a mayde of brenten ars survives in a 1550 printed edition, which is suggestive of a wider audience and 'mainstream' commercial value for carols.[104] In this song, a young woman regularly meets with a miller for no-strings sex. The adjective in the title, 'brenten', means burnt, but can loosely be translated to mean 'promiscuous'. Yet, the first stanza ends by saying 'she was a mayden neuer the worse'.[105] Perhaps despite her promiscuity this particular young woman has not suffered any loss to her sexual reputation as a result of her encounters. When the maid and the miller get together they are in the missionary position.[106] But contrary to historians' assumptions that medieval people understood sex as something that happened *on* rather than *with* a woman, the maid takes an active role in dictating the hour, place, and pace of the sexual act.

> Layde she was vpon a sacke;
> 'Stryke softe,' she sayd, 'hurt not my backe,
> And spare not; let the myll clacke'.[107]
>
> [Laid she was upon a sack
> 'Strike gently,' she said, 'do not hurt my back,
> And do not hold back; let the mill clack'.]

In the above verse, the line 'let the myll clack' is usually translated as 'let the mill clatter'. There is onomatopoeia here, but that is perhaps not the first meaning that would have come to the medieval reader's mind in this context. The word 'clakke' refers to the workings of a mill – specifically, the clapper, a wooden flap that strikes against the chute through which grain is fed.[108] For a medieval audience, 'clakke' was also used to refer to sins of the tongue, excessive chatter, or clamour.[109] For example, in the *Owl and the Nightingale*, the Nightingale criticises the Owl's hooked beak, with which she 'clackes oft and longe' [chatters incessantly].[110] In the c.1450 *York Plays*, soldiers drive off the

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104 'It was a mayde of brenten ars', Henry Huntington Library, Christmas carolles newely Imprynted (Richard Kele), fols. 9v-10; DIMEV 2759; STC 5204.5; EEC, 280; *The Faber Book of Popular* Verse, ed. G. Grigson (London, 1974), 106; MELC 289.
105 'It was a mayde of brenten ars', l. 6.
106 The most acceptable configuration, for which see the discussion and helpful flowchart in Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Society*, 152-168, and particularly 162, fig. 4.1.
107 'It was a mayde of brenten ars', ll. 8-10.
108 MED clak(k)e n.2 1.b) the clapper of a mill.
109 MED clak(k)e n.2 1.a) Outcry, clamour; MED clak(k)en v.(2) 1.a) To rattle or clatter, chatter; b) to speak, talk.
110 'It was a mayde of brenten ars', l. 81.

women gathered at the Passion with insults and threats, saying 'Ther quenes vs comeres with þer clakke' [These harlots annoy us with their chatter].[111] In Peter Idley's *Instructions to his Son*, the narrator warns 'Lete thy tonge not clakke as a mille' [Do not clack your tongue like a mill], invoking the clapper as a metaphor for the tongue.[112]

In our text, the miller is referred to as 'the mill', and his sexual organs likewise are euphemised as elements of the mill's machinery – for example his 'mylstones' and 'vyce' can be ready 'at a trice', or at a moment's notice.[113] We might read this euphemism forward into the use of 'clakke'. While we don't know what exactly the miller is tonguing, it is possible to suggest that alongside a reading of penetrative sex, we are also being afforded an exceedingly rare glimpse of a woman enjoying cunnilingus.[114]

The final verse emphasises again that it is the maid, and not the miller, who is in control of their interactions and perhaps gains the most from them:

> This mayd to myll ofte did resorte
> And of her game made no reporte,
> But to her it was full great conforte.[115]
>
> [This maid to mill did often resort
> And of her game made no report,
> But to her it was a full great comfort.]

Ultimately whether the miller takes pleasure from the encounter is a moot point, and the fictive woman remains in full possession of her reputation as a maid, without value judgement or consequence for her supposed transgression. Yet the miller is not made the object of ridicule: he is virile and has sufficient sexual prowess to give regular 'conforte' to his lover. 'Comfort' in Middle

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111 *York Plays: the plays performed by the crafts or mysteries of York on the day of Corpus Christi in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries*, ed. L. T. Smith (Oxford, 1885), 344, ll. 211-12.
112 P. Idley, 'Instructions to His Son', in *Peter Idley's Instructions to His Son*, ed. C. D'Evelyn (London, 1935), 1.50.
113 'It was a mayde of brenten ars', ll. 13-14; Another encounter where a man and his genitals are described by the machinery of his trade is found in a lyric copied by John Shirley in the 1420s into a prose and lyrics collection. See Of alle þe crafftes oute blessed be þe ploughe', London, British Library, Additional 16165, ff. 244v-245; DIMEV 4138; *Jyl of Breyntfords Testament*, 35-6.
114 For the rarity of instances of cunnilingus in penitentials, see O'Donnell, 'Cunnilingus in the Middle Ages'.
115 'It was a mayde of brenten ars', ll. 16-18.

English does carry connotations of pleasure and gratification; in *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Lady suggests many a woman would find 'comfort' with Gawain.[116] A dialogue song where a young woman just wants to go and milk her cow while a man attempts to intimidate her into having sex with him in the field includes the reproaching phrase 'why wyll ye nott geue me no comfortt' [why will you not give me comfort], but she is allowed to go on her way unharmed.[117] This is therefore a particularly interesting word choice in *It was a mayde of brenten ars*. It complicates any notion about male fantasies of insatiable women in the lyric, as she has the capacity to be 'comforted', or sexually fulfilled, by the miller.

Our next example uses multiple languages to signal sexual themes. 'Severalness' and wordplay did not have to be limited to one language in the multilingual literary culture of later medieval England. English, French, and Latin had social and intellectual functions that could be distinguished.[118] 'Women's songs' made conscious and strategic language selections – a phenomenon linguists call 'code-switching' – to describe sex acts.[119] Scholars of Middle English have until recently focussed on code-switching as an oral phenomenon, but increasingly historians such as Tim William Machan have demonstrated the potential in analysing code-switches in late medieval English literary practices. The intelligibility of literature, he argues, depends on a 'degree of verisimilitude': the lack of comment or emphasis on code-switching in literature marks it as an unremarkable and uncontroversial sociolinguistic practice.[120] But the 'practice' here is not unmediated. We must bear in mind that 'speech within speech becomes also speech about

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116 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 124.
117 'Hey troly loly lo mayde whether go you', London, British Library MS Additional 31922, fols. 124v-128r; Called a 'sophisticated story of love' in DIMEV 3324.
118 M. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (London, 1979), 202.
119 S. Romaine, *Language in Society: an introduction to sociolinguistics* (Oxford, 1994), 62. For example, in *Growing Up Bilingual*, Ana Celia Zentella found that Puerto Rican children living in New York would code-switch into their native language for taboo topics, which she interpreted as the identification of vulgar words with the vulgar tongue. See A. C. Zentella, *Growing up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York* (Oxford, 1997), 97.
120 T. W. Machan, 'The Visual Pragmatics of Code Switching in Late Middle English Literature', *Code-Switching in Early English*, eds. H. Schendl and L. Wright (Berlin, 2012), 303-334, at 303-5.

speech'.[121] Code-switches are therefore one way of identifying the implicit competing voices within texts. For example, switches into French in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* associate reported speech with noble discourse. As Ad Putter argues, 'the French imports the flavour of the aristocratic court', creating opportunities for social critique rather than simply looking to reflect reality.[122]

In literary studies, short term code-switches are sometimes interpreted as demonstrative of limited proficiency in acquired languages. Scholars apply this to either the author or their creations, usually depending on the availability of biographical information about the author. In the case of the Wife of Bath and Lady Mede in Mary Davidson's study, for example, their lack of ability to sustain a code-switch betrays them as 'under-lettered, limited monolinguals'.[123] This is, of course, predicated on our knowledge that both Chaucer and Langland's own multilingual skills surpassed that of their creations. Susan Crane makes a related point regarding the Wife of Bath: that she speaks 'through and against' misogynistic clerical literature. In this instance, the Latinate literary antecedents she/Chaucer references represent the group she is excluded from and oppressed by, and which he is included in and reinforces.[124] The effect of this is far from stable: while such characters can reinforce a set of notions about gender, class, and so on, they might also challenge authoritative traditions by speaking that discourse from a 'naive' perspective.

In sermons and lyrics, short-term code switches are referred to as macaronic. Macaronic sermons were common. At their most practical, switches into Latin could flag theological authorities, while switches into English pinpointed segments that the preacher felt it was vital to express accessibly.[125] But this was a flexible linguistic system, and preachers could be playful in

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[121] Ibid, 239; Arnold, 'The Historian as Inquisitor', 382.
[122] Putter, 'Code-switching in Langland, Chaucer, and the *Gawain* poet', 288.
[123] M. Davidson, 'Code-Switching and Authority in Late Medieval England', *Neophilologus* 87:3 (2003), 473-486, at 478.
[124] S. Crane, 'The Writing Lesson of 1381', *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. B. Hanawalt (Minneapolis, 1992), 201-21, at 215.
[125] The best book on this is still S. Wenzel, *Macaronic Sermons: Bilingualism and Preaching in Late Medieval England* (Ann Arbor, 1994).

how they conceptualised code-switches, for example at times using English lyrics as the authoritative 'text' of the sermon.[126] By the mid-fifteenth century, macaronic verse was an established literary tradition in England. In most macaronic carols, a tail-rhyme form is used. The narrative is given in English, with Latin in the *cauda* or tail-line to provide scriptural authority, not unlike the ways in which short quotations are used in macaronic sermon literature.[127] Ad Putter gives the example of *Gabryell, that angel bright*, with the tail-line '*Regina celi, letare*' [Queen of heaven, rejoice], to illustrate this authoritative switch.[128] As Machan emphasises, code-switching can occur in a variety of dialogues and is therefore subject to generic conventions, all of which produce their own meaning. When a code-switch in a carol is comical, it therefore seems likely that the humour is derived from the inversion of the usually authoritative nature of the switch within the genre.

The *Inducas* carols offer an important example of three macaronic songs, appearing in three entirely separate manuscripts, which use the same burden for different narratives of illicit relations between friars and nuns.[129] The satirical burden is a corruption of a phrase from the *Pater Noster*: 'lead us not into temptation' becomes 'lead us in temptations' by omitting the crucial negative, and by shifting from singular to plural (and accusative to ablative) with '*temptationibus*'.[130]

In *Ther was a frier of order gray*, a friar and a nun flirt during singing lessons. The text shifts between the third person and two speakers. A misquotation of Matt. 12:18, *'Ponam spiritum meum super eum*' [I will put my spirit upon him] turns the verse into a reference to penetrative sex: '*Et*

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126 Playful code-switches are also used in *sermons joyeux*, for which see L. O. Vasvari, 'Obscene Onomastics in Medieval Trickster Tales', *EHumanista* 15 (2010), 1-20; J. Koopmans and P. Verhyk, *Sermons Joyeux et Truanderie* (Amsterdam, 1985).

127 Wenzel, *Macaronic Sermons*, 6.

128 A. Putter, 'The French of English Letters: Two Trilingual Verse Epistles in Context', *Language and Culture in Medieval Britain: the French of England, c.1100-1500*, ed. J. Wogan-Browne (Woodbridge, 2009), 397-408, 399-400.

129 'Ther was a frier of order gray', Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Addiional. 7350, Part I, (Box 2), fol. ii; DIMEV 5593; EEC 281; See also Cambridge, Queen's College MS C.4.11 front flyleaf; San Marino, CA, Henry Huntington Library, Christmas carolles newely Imprynted (Richard Kele), pp. 18-19; DIMEV 5426; EEC 311.

130 As this is a play on the Lord's Prayer, we might expect this to read 'Into temptations'. However, we are in the ablative and not the accusative. Perhaps the scribe's Latin is not the best, but I rather like the grammar play of an almost processional 'in', rather than the more pejorative and blaming sense of 'into'.

ponam tollum meum ad te' [And I shall put my weapon to you].[131] The interactions between Latin and the vernacular continue:

> The nunne was taught to syng '*Sepe*',
> *Inducas,*
> '*Lapides expungnaverunt me*'
> *In temptationibus.*[132]
>
> [The nun was taught to sing, '*Often*',
> *Lead us,*
> '*The stones have overcome me*'
> *In temptations.*

'*Lapides expungnaverunt me*' is a macaronic pun on 'stones', widely used in Middle English to mean testicles.[133] It is also a reference to Psalm 129:1, *'Saepe expugnaverunt me a juventute mea*' [They have greatly oppressed me from my youth].[134] Latin extracts in sermons and songs were a mode of quotation as illustration. They were intended to signpost the wider scriptural context.[135] Further, Psalm 129 was recited at Compline in the Office of the Blessed Virgin. The suggestion, it seems, is that the friar is teaching the nun to sing in sequence, and the reader or listener was meant to take meaning from the rest of the scripture. The Psalm continues, '*supra dorsum meum fabricaverunt peccatores; prolongaverunt iniquitatem suam*' [The wicked have wrought upon my back; they have lengthened their iniquity].[136] The code-switch is not only profane in its twisting of the wording of scriptural authority, but it subverts the meaning of the remainder of the Psalm for those who knew it by rote. The authority of the Latin is undermined through using the common trope of quoting

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131 Matt. 12:18; 'Ther was a frier of order gray', l. 21; Greene identifies 'tollum' as a variation on the Latin *telum* in Greene, *The Early English Carols*, 497; Croft suggests it is a variation of the Middle English *thole*, or peg in his 'The "Friar of Order Gray" and The Nun', *Review of English Studies*, New Series 32:125 (1981), 1-16, at 5. Either interpretation can reasonably read as phallic.

132 'Ther was a frier of order gray', ll. 27-30.

133 See for example 'We bern abowtyn non cattes skynnys', in London, British Library MS Sloane 2593, fols. 26v-27; DIMEV 6163: 'I haue a poket for the nonys/ Therine ben tweyne precyous stonys' [I have a pocket for the purpose/ Therein are two precious stones]. This collection of over fifty English carols, without musical setting, was compiled in Bury St Edmunds in the first half of the fifteenth century.

134 Psalm 129:1.

135 E. A. Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: the Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1990), 178.

136 Psalm 129:3; perhaps the words of the Psalm make the friar think of the scratch marks that over-zealous sex might leave.

short passages to indicate the wider context, then changing the connotations. In the last stanza of *Ther was a frier of order gray*, the friar and the nun reach the crescendo:

> Thus the fryer lyke a prety man,
> *Inducas,*
> Ofte rokked the nunnës quoniam
> *In temptationibus.*[137]
>
> [Thus the friar, like a gallant man,
> Lead us
> Often rocked the nun's *quoniam*
> In temptations.]

Quoniam has a range of meanings, including 'since', 'whereas', 'because', and 'on account of'. In contrast to the idea that a superposed language is the more formal, here the affectation in Latin clearly occupies the vulgar or comic position within the code-switch.[138] *Quoniam* is vague, but considered to be a pun on the Old French *conin* [rabbit], a euphemism for women's genitalia.[139] While it could be argued that the code-switch has an obscuring function, *quoniam* was a funny and widely-understood euphemism, among literate circles at least. The Wife of Bath uses it in the sense of her own vulva when she boasts, 'And trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me/ I hadde the best *quoniam* myghte be'.[140] James W. Marchand argues for usages two centuries prior to Chaucer, particularly in clerical texts.[141] 'Rokked', in the sense of moving back and forth, is also somewhat imprecise, but we can well imagine the pleasurable motion it might seek to convey.[142] This highly

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137 'Ther was a frier of order gray', ll. 31-34.
138 R. Fasold, *Introduction to Sociolinguistics, Volume 1: The Sociolinguistics of Society* (Oxford, 1984), 53.
139 DMF *Connin* i) *Lapin*; ii) *Sexe de la femme*; *Quoniam* perhaps also bears phonetic similarities with MED *quem(e* n.1a) Pleasure, satisfaction, which OED considers a possible origin of 'quim'; MELC, 305, reads 'nun's thingy', perhaps as an attempt to represent *quoniam* and its non-meaning as a noun.
140 The Wife of Bath uses it in the same sense: 'And trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me/ I hadde the best *quoniam* myghte be'. G. Chaucer, 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue', *The Riverside Chaucer*, 113, l. 608.
141 J. W. Marchand, '"Quoniam", "Wife of Bath's Prologue" D. 608', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 100:1 (1999), 43-9, at 44.
142 MED rokken v. 2(a) to move back and forth unstably; One analysis of this text references *The Taymouth Hours*, London, British Library MS Yates Thompson 13, fol. 177 as an illuminated image that illustrates the act described here, for which see C. E. Brim, 'The Development and Decline of British Antifraternal Literature' (PhD Thesis, McMaster University, 1990), 272. However, it is important to recognize that this image comes with its own context, in the form of a caption in French that condemns the friar's behaviour, which serves as a safety warning for the young laywomen who were the *Taymouth Hours'* primary audience.

visual and physical description centralises the effect on the fictive woman's vulva, and emphasises that a 'prety' man is one who stimulates his partner.[143]

Recovering a language for sex acts can suggest to us that medieval sexuality was not entirely predicated on penetrative sex. Women's pleasure was not irrelevant, and their roles were not passive. Rather, we have demonstrated that there are glimpses of sex acts centred on women's pleasure, and that these were enunciated via a mixture of euphemism, metaphor, code switches, and on occasion, obscenity. In some of the texts here, pleasure is moreover connected to women as active participants or sexual subjects, as opposed to sexual objects. Pleasure and subjectivity are however not one and the same, and so we next turn to the ways in which 'Women's songs' present subjectivity via gaze, fantasising, and signalling sexual interest.

WOMEN'S SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY

We will now explore where we find women as active sexual subjects in 'Women's songs'. Where historians and literary scholars have identified subjectivity in the lyrics that follow, the majority have concluded that the women act in naivety, then get pregnant and express regret, either confirming that such women were the object of misogynist ridicule, or treating them as a warning/teaching moment for other women.[144] Debate regarding the role of pregnancy in the carols centres on the extent to which the scenario can be interpreted as a cautionary tale to illustrate the consequences of illicit sexual relationships. Bennett argues that they may well have been performed by women, but were produced to police women's behaviour, to warn against licentiousness among singlewomen.[145]

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143 Another pretty man appears in the man-voiced lyric 'Lestenit lordynges I you beseke', London, British Library, MS Sloane 2593, fol. 29r-v; DIMEV 3117; In this lyric, a man takes every opportunity to bear/bare his 'baselard', or long dagger. In the last stanza, he bares it to his 'damme', his wife or mistress: 'Che seyde I was a praty manne/ And wel cowde bere myn baselard'.

144 Plummer, 'The Woman's Song', 150-1; Bennett, 'Ventriloquisms', 191; Klinck, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric*, 233; L. Garner, 'Contexts of Interpretation in the Burdens of Middle English Carols', *Neophilologus* 84:3 (2000), 467-482, C. Harris, 'Teen Moms: Violence, Consent, and Embodied Subjectivity in Middle English Pregnancy Laments', *The Review of English Studies* 71:298 (2020), 1-18.

145 Bennett, 'Ventriloquisms', 191-2.

The operative framework for these conclusions is to view the lyrics as being part of the wider genre of 'Women's laments'. In order to assess the extent to which this framework is a helpful one, I will first introduce the themes of 'Women's laments', before treating three lyrics that have been described by scholars as warning laments. Through this section I continue to use close reading with an alertness to sex acts and ways to describe them. But my main purpose is to draw out the assumptions that shape how scholars read these texts the way they do. I demonstrate how easily we are drawn back into using 'Women's songs' to reiterate the dynamics that we already believe to be in play, where women are passive sex objects that do not make choices, but rather have choices imposed on them. Lastly, I read two lyrics that appear to consciously play with the tropes of laments to describe women's subjectivity and power within sexual relationships.

The 'Woman's Lament' is undoubtedly a significant genre in Middle English lyric. It has two main branches: the laments of the Virgin Mary; and laments where anonymous women relate feelings of abandonment and regret about a lover or lovers. This second group focuses on the futility of wanting to take back what has happened:

> Were that that is y-don
> Yet for to done
> Nolde it nevere been y-don
> For nones mannes bone.[146]
>
> [If only that which has been done
> Was yet to be done
> [I] would that it never be done
> Not for any man's will.]

Another text that echoes this sentiment is found in an anonymous fourteenth-century sermon collection, where it is framed as the wailing of unmarried young women in childbirth:

> Waylaway whi ded y so
> Now ich am in alle wo.[147]

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[146] Durham, Durham Cathedral Library MS B.I.18, fol. 117; A version also appears in Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Berlin MS Theol. Lat. fol. 249, at fol. 131v; for both see DIMEV 6221 and similar wording forms the chorus of *Y louede a child of þis cuntre*, in Cambridge, Gonville & Caius College MS 383, fol. 210; DIMEV 2222.

[147] Oxford, Balliol College MS 220, fol. 220v; DIMEV 6218.

[Wellaway why did I so
Now I am all in woe.]

The laments are simple in their message, and operate as warnings about the negative consequences of extra-marital sex. Their main characteristics are the repetition of woe and weeping, with a lack of clarity about what has occurred prior to their abandonment. Their focus is not on specific sex acts, but rather the emotional and social consequences when a sexual/ romantic relationship ends. It is worth noting that while these are more often woman voiced, there are many gender-neutral and men-voiced songs of abandonment, such as *I must go walk the wood so wild*, in which a banished lover wanders the greenwoods and lives on acorns.[148]

Three 'Women's songs' have received significant treatment as laments: *Al þis day ic han souȝt*; *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day*; and *Þis enþer day I mete a clerke*. All three feature a servant woman whose sexual encounter results in pregnancy. They also all follow the carol form, and so have a burden which is repeated between verses. Burdens operate as a commentary on the main narrative, and are therefore vital in our understanding of the lyrics' messages. We will look at each song in turn.

Al þis day ic han souȝt opens with a young woman rushing to finish her chores so that she can meet her lover.[149] Lori Ann Garner and Anne Klinck both prioritise readings in which the song is a lament, and the woman is the object of pity or ridicule because the song concludes with her extra-marital pregnancy. Both base this interpretation on the song's burden: Garner suggests the burden expresses regret as the speaker realizes 'that no longer can she do as she wishes on holidays' because of her pregnancy; for Klinck, the burden underpins the speaker's 'grief'.[150] There is little support for this in the burden itself, which expresses such excitement at the approach of the holy day that the speaker is unable to concentrate on her household tasks:

Rybbe ne rele ne spynne yc ne may,

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148 'I must go walke þe woed so wyld', San Marino, CA, Henry Huntington Library MS EL 34.B.60, fol. 11v; DIMEV 2229.
149 'Al þis day ic han souȝt', Gonville & Caius 383, p. 41; DIMEV 393; EEC 306-7, ll. 3-6.
150 L. Garner, 'Contexts of Interpretation', 475; Klinck, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric*, 240.

For joyȝe þat it is holyday.[151]

[I cannot clean flax, nor reel thread, nor spin
For joy that it is [a] holy day.]

Interpreting this as a lament intended to reinforce marriage as the only acceptable conjugal context requires reading solely through a moralising lens. In fact, we can see how editorial choices can dramatically underplay the capacity for women's active desire and joy within the text. The speaker describes the sexual fantasy that distracts her from her work:

Sone he wolle take me be þe hond,
& he wolle legge me on þe lond,
Þat al my buttockus ben of sond[152]

[Soon he will take me by the hand,
And he will lay/satisfy[153] me on the land,
[So] that all my buttocks are parted[154]]

Duncan, Harris, and Klinck read variations of 'covered with sand' for 'ben of sond', to match corrections of the other rhymes of the stanza (hand, land).[155] This approach is not unwarranted. 'Sond' is a variation of sand, and 'ben of' could, albeit loosely, be interpreted as a metaphor where the speaker is saying that her buttocks are sandy or dirty. However, prioritising modern standard spelling as the means of rendering the meaning of text is quite a sideways approach. What happens if we instead adjust our expectations to focus on poetic sense, and see 'hond' and 'lond' as rational spellings in their own right leading to the most emphatic line – the last of the stanza? It then seems reasonable to consider other meanings of 'sond'.

We will first focus on 'ben of', taken above to mean 'made of'. The *MED* includes one example in total, where Chaucer uses 'ben of' in this sense, in his *Legend of Good Women*.[156] But this construction is actually far more commonly used for a vast range of prepositional phrases,

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151 'Al þis day ic han souȝt', ll. 1-2.
152 Ibid, ll. 38-40.
153 MED leggen v. 2(a) relieve; This is also used in a sexual sense in 'The Romaunt of the Rose', *The Riverside Chaucer*, 739, l. 5016.
154 MED sonder (adj.) 1a. separated.
155 MELC, 281; Klinck, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric*, 241; Harris, 'Teen Moms', 12.
156 MED of prep. 10(a) made of; 'Al hadde folkes hertes ben of stones' [If all folk's hearts were made of stones], in 'The Legend of Good Women', *The Riverside Chaucer*, 619, l. 1841.

alongside an adjective to show a descriptive relationship or characteristic, to modify nouns.[157] Perhaps here, our noun is 'buttockus' [buttocks], 'of' is the modifier, and 'sond' is descriptive.

For 'sond', we might consider three root words: 'sonder', meaning separated or parted (as in the modern asunder); 'sounde', which has associations of being cured, satisfied, or assuaged; or potentially 'shonden', to be disgraced.[158] The reference to 'al' of the speaker's buttocks is a little unclear. One meaning may be that her buttocks are 'totally', or 'utterly' parted, as 'sonder' comes from the Old English 'on sundrian', so there is precent for 'sonder' requiring a preposition such as 'on' or 'of'. A more literal 'all', where the buttocks refer more generally to the area from the vagina through to the anus is also a valid interpretation.[159] Most vitally, this is the only reference to buttocks in this kind of text, and is intended as obscene.[160] Whether the speaker's buttocks are parted, satisfied, or disgraced, using 'ben of' in this sense seems to better fit the context of a fantasy where the speaker is describing what she anticipates from the sexual encounter.

When the couple meets, the speaker describes what actually happens. The following lines have caused some difficulty for editors, seemingly due to the positioning of the couple, and perhaps in order to make the below encounter fit with the idea that the speaker's buttocks will get covered with sand:

> In he pult & out he drow,
> & ever yc lay on hym y-low.[161]
>
> [In he thrust, and out he drew
> And ever I lay on him close (lit. low).]

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157 This is somewhat simplified. See MED of prep. senses 14-24b for the kinds of relationships 'ben of' as a prepositional phrase can grammatically describe, with examples.
158 MED, sonder (adj.) 1a. separated; sound(e (adj.) 2c. of a wound or sickness: cured or healed; d. assuaged of sorrow or of lovesickness; e. in a state of well-being, flourishing; shonden (v.) 1a) to be disgraced
159 Words for the buttocks rarely have one specific meaning, and are dependent on context, particularly for people with vaginas. See MED buttok n.; ars n. 1, 3.
160 Another obscene reference to a woman's buttocks appears in the ballad 'Jyl of Breyntfords testament', where the titular Jyl is suffering chronic indigestion. See *Jyl of Breyntfords Testament, by Robert Copland, Boke-Prynter, The Wyll of the Devil and his Last Testament, A Talk of Ten Wives on their Husbands' Ware, A Balade or two by Chaucer, And Other Short Pieces*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London, 1871), 7-19, l. 241.
161 'Al þis day ic han souȝt', ll. 43-4.

Duncan reads 'I lay beneath him', as do Harris and Klinck in their translations.[162] Duncan has written elsewhere that editors ought to question 'the integrity of the text as it stands in the manuscript' in order to reach a translation that makes 'common' and 'poetic' sense.[163]

But there are multiple reasons why in this case, such an approach does not help us understand what is actually being described. The first and most simple is that this act does not *have* to be aligned with the earlier one. When the speaker talks about what is going to happen with her buttocks, she is fantasising, whereas here she is describing the actual act she enjoys with her lover. Moreover, in similar usages of 'I lay on' where the subject is a man, there is little difficulty with translating 'I lay on [her]' as sex performed by a man on top of a woman.[164]

Despite this, editors are willing to do some doublethink in order to get this couple into missionary position, where the woman is the passive object. The word that this configuration relies on is 'y-low', which these editors take to mean 'beneath', or 'below'. This is not simply phonetic – there is potential to see this as a variant of 'aloue', a contraction of 'on loue'. which can mean both 'low' and 'below'.[165] This would however be an unusual spelling variation, and leaves a mismatch with 'I lay on him', as 'aloue' requires no extra preposition 'on'. If we instead read 'y-low' as either a simple 'y-' prefix, we might render 'I lay on him low'.[166] This resolves the additional preposition 'on'. It also leaves us with a woman on top. In this configuration, the burden reads as less regretful than anticipatory, and a far cry from the univocality of laments.

The words we are dealing with here are not so obscure. There is some thinking to do about the relationship between legge/ lay/ y-low. But otherwise the meaning is quite straightforward to put together – once we remove the obstacle of trying to configure this as a man-doing situation. When editors employ the neutral abstraction of 'glossing' to return lyrics to 'common' and 'poetic'

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162 Ibid, l. 17. MELC, 281; Harris, 'Teen Moms', 12; Klinck, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric*, 241.
163 Duncan, 'Editing Issues in Middle English', 22-3.
164 MED lien v.1 1(b) with sexual implications; see examples.
165 MED aloue adv. 1(a) of position or direction: low or lower down, below; downward.
166 For discussion of the inflected past participle as a metrical recourse see A. Putter, J. A. Jefferson, and M. Stokes, *Studies in the Metre of Alliterative Verse* (Oxford, 2007), 28.

sense, it is evident that the 'common' sense being referred to is meant to be historically coherent. But inevitably this relies on dominant discourse to determine how people would have interpreted the extent to which women were active sexual subjects, and the kinds of sex acts they might imagine or perform.

If we start from the assumption that our speaker is lamenting, then we also lose the ways in which a character might express actively imagining, seeking, and having sex. The song is funny, but not at the expense of the speaker. The wordplay is cleverer than that. The speaker repeatedly draws our attention to the gap between the expected solemnity of holy days, and her own priorities – in particular, her physical labours make her deserving of role reversal, where she herself is 'thredded' and 'kneaded'. It is her 'desire' that is provoked, her expectations that frame how we view the encounter. That it ends in pregnancy does not negate everything that has come before. Rather, we should view *Al þis day ic han souzt* in all its complexity, that a singlewoman might fantasise about and enjoy sex, but also recognise that the potential consequences fall solely on her.

Another lyric viewed as a lament is *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day*. Indeed, in a recent treatment by Frances Eustace, the speaker is called a 'hapless caroller'.[167] I want to suggest that this is rather a lyric about sexual choice-making, written from a woman's perspective, where she is a sexual agent.[168] Like the previous lyric, it ends in pregnancy, and fear of retribution when her condition is discovered, but it also contains complex enunciations of subjectivity. In *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day*, the mutual seduction clearly begins in a public space. The male figure at first views the speaker as she leads the dance. He then enters the ring of dancers to join her.[169] This ring suggests a round dance, where the leader sings the stanzas while the company moves round, and then stops to sing the burden. Chaganti argues that the carol form of the lyric and the speaker's self-appointed position as the leader of the dance encourage us to imagine a 'correspondence of

[167] F. Eustace, *Secular Carolling in Late Medieval England* (Leeds, 2022), 84.
[168] 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', Cambridge, Gonville & Caius College 383, p. 41; DIMEV 3044; EEC 307-8.
[169] 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', ll. 9-12.

dance and lyric'.[170] This does not straightforwardly mean that this text functioned as a dance accompaniment: rather, the audience can map the form onto movement, where a woman sings and enacts the lyrics. On the page of the manuscript, she is nevertheless leading both the literal and the metaphorical dance: that is, she sets the sexual tone.

It is through her gaze that we are led through the trajectory of the encounter. She looks at faces, makes eye contact, takes in bodies: she calls the male figure a 'ȝong strippelyng' [young slim youth].[171] In what Cartlidge refers to as 'pride before a fall', the speaker imagines herself through the eyes of others, expecting that the slim young clerk finds her 'ful werly'.[172] She sees him looking, and assumes the reason: 'he lokede me vpon, he þout þat y was gay' [he looked upon me, he thought that I was attractive].[173] While 'gay' could simply mean lively or fun, it also held an association with sexual availability.[174]

It is only by gradual degrees – 'Ever he cam ner' [Ever nearer he came] – that the mutual exchanging of glances escalates.[175] Physical connection begins in full view of the company:

> As we trundun owre dance in a narw place,
> Jak bed[176] me þe mouth, a cussynge þer was.[177]
>
> [As we turned our dance in a narrow place,
> Jack offered/ bedded me the mouth, a kissing there was.]

Here then is a far more complicated view of the rules of physical space than we encountered in Chapter One.[178] The woman is encouraged by Jack to leave the company with the offer of a pair of gloves.[179] Bennett, Cartlidge, and Harris view this as complicating the speaker's ability to

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170 Chaganti, *Strange Footing*, 87.
171 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', l. 11.
172 Ibid., l. 17; Cartlidge, 'Representations of Extra-Marital Pregnancy', 409.
173 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', l. 4.
174 MED gai adj. 1 joyous, merry, gay; light-hearted, carefree; also, wanton, lewd, lascivious.
175 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', ll. 13-14.
176 A pun. See MED bed 2(a) a bed used for sexual intercourse; beden 1(a) to offer (sth.), offer (to do sth.).
177 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', ll. 18-19.
178 Chapter One, 44-6.
179 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', l. 27.

consent, as she may simply be following the temptation of a gift which in some contexts is suggestive of intent to marry.[180]

However, the use of the pun 'bed me' indicates that the speaker is not deceived or forced, but rather offered a kiss, while simultaneously mischievously revealing that the expectation of a sexual encounter has already been established. Moreover, the dancers turn into a 'narw place', perhaps imagining the sex act that will follow. A reading where the speaker participates in creating potential for a sexual encounter is further supported by Jack winking and stepping on the speaker's toe. It appears this was a recognised signal in illicit semiotics: in another carol the speaker's pregnancy immediately follows an exchange with a male character that 'twynkelid, but sayd nowt, and on myn fot he trede' [winked, but said nothing, and on my foot he trod].[181] It is important to recognise that none of these individual moments amount to consent to sex. But what they do amount to is a series of mutual and widely understood sexual signals that can be safely performed within the context of the dance.

As with *Al þis day ic han souȝt*, it is hard to read *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day* only or wholly as a lament. The burden protests the innocence of the speaker:

> Alas, alas, the wyle,
> Þout y on no gyle[182]
>
> [Alas, alas, [all] the while,[183]
> I thought on no consequences/impropriety (lit. guile)]

While we could interpret this as naivety on the part of the speaker, this would require us to ignore all of the sexual coding from her perspective that we have just witnessed. Rather, the burden rings

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[180] Bennett, 'Ventriloquisms' 189; Cartlidge, 'Representations of Extra-Marital Pregnancy', 407; Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 118-9.
[181] 'As I went on ȝol day in owre procession', British Library, Sloane 2593, f. 34, l. 20; DIMEV 635; EEC 309; Robbins 21-2.
[182] 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', ll. 1-2.
[183] Usually translated 'Alas, alas, the deception!'. The exclamation is added – these texts rarely include punctuation. Deception may be regarded as a pun, as 'the wyle' can equally be read as 'the while', i.e. 'at the time', or 'the wile', i.e. the wiliness, the charms of men. MED wile n. 2(a) an act of deceit; 2(b) charms; while n. 1(a) in conjunctive phrases introducing adv. clause, during the time.

increasingly hollow and comic as the carol progresses, especially when juxtaposed with her narrative of entering the clerk's chamber:

> Forsothe þo Jak & yc wenten to bedde.
> He prikede & he pransede, nolde he neuer lynne,
> Yt was þe murgest nyt þat euer y cam ynne.[184]
>
> [For truth then Jack and I went to sleep together [lit. bed].
> He pricked and he pranced,[185] [he?] would that he never cease,
> It was the merriest night that I ever came across.

Her appreciation of the clerk's sexual prowess – his ability to prick and prance – leaves us again with a knowing speaker. She describes the encounter as 'the merriest night' she ever encountered, with the implication that, while claiming ignorance and exonerating herself of any blame for the encounter, the speaker is an enthusiastic participant with an appreciative female gaze.[186]

We can spend a little more time with the clause 'nolde he neuer lynne', because it demonstrates the structural 'severalness' of this lyric.[187] Previous translations are not satisfactory, because it is a complicated sentiment. In Middle English, a double negative does not make a positive. Rather, it is an intensifier, giving force to the main verb. Two editors go with 'he would not leave off', reading 'nolde' as ne+wolde, enabling a reading where the male is positioned as persistently seeking his own satisfaction.[188] If we expand this and remove the colloquial misogyny

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184 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', ll. 31-3.
185 To caper like a horse.
186 The OED does not support 'come' in relation to orgasm until 1650. The MED also contains no examples of this sense, however, given the database's reliance on canonical texts to establish usage, I concur with Putter that it is 'risky to rely too much on MED evidence when one is seeking to recover the connotations of words'. See A. Putter, 'Code-switching in Langland, Chaucer, and the *Gawain* poet: Diglossia and footing', Code-*Switching in Early English*, eds. H. Schendl & L. Wright (Berlin, 2012), 281-301, at 289. Jeffrey Masten has further specifically argued for an earlier usage of 'come' as sexual slang in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward the Second*, 1594, in his forthcoming critical edition. J. Masten, 'Edward II' (unpublished paper, delivered 9 March 2017, Body Language Bawdy Talk Conference, University of Michigan). It is possible that this usage could occur even earlier. I am grateful to Prof. Masten for his comments on my paper at the same conference.
187 Introduction, 19.
188 MELC, 282; R. T. Davies, *Middle English Lyrics: A critical anthology* (London, 1963), 204-6.

of the editor, this would be 'he would not cease'.[189] Using this construction, Klinck and Harris arrive at 'he would never stop/cease'.[190]

However, this translation makes another grammatical error. It makes an assumption of reading 'nolde' as a negative modal verb, rather than being a negative modal auxiliary – for simplicity, let us call this a negative expression of the verb 'will'.[191] What does that mean? Essentially, it is the difference between 'I would not do this thing', and 'It is not my *will* to do this thing'. It is a possible reading – but far from the most obvious. The negative modal verb is rarely contracted in this way. It would make more sense as a negative expression of will, where 'nolde' can be found as a far more banal usage.

To review: we have ruled out ne+wolde as a modal verb. What we are looking for in a translation, then, is an expression of negative will, and for the male object to never cease. At the most basic and un-augmented translation, we have the following:

Did not will he ever cease

This is where the subject becomes important. In order to gain a subject, we have to either read back, or forward. To read back, we would end up with:

[He] did not will [to] ever cease

In this construction, we might read from the speaker or the male character's perspective. Given we are located in *her* narrative, and not his, we could understand this as a gleeful aside that her partner is having as much fun as she is.

One further reading is weaker, but still grammatically possible. Elsewhere, the text expects us to read the implicit 'I' subject. If we do the same here, the result is:

[I] would he never cease

It was the merriest night that I ever came across

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189 H. Bergner, *Lyrik des Mittelalters: Probleme und Interpretationen* (Stuttgart, 1983), 336-7, gives this gloss.
190 Klinck, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric*, 243; Harris, 'Teen Moms', 9.
191 MED As modal auxiliary expressing willingness: to be willing (to do sth.), be disposed: (a) present form; (b) present form with implied inf.; (c) past form with present meaning; also with implied inf.; (d) past form with past meaning; (e) past form with past meaning with implied inf.

This might be simply glossed in modern English as an interjection: 'Would that he never cease!'. The speaker (first person subject) would not will (auxiliary modal) he/him (object) never (intensifier) to cease. Here, it would be the woman enjoying herself so much that she hopes it never ends, because it is the best night she has ever had.

This may feel like a very long-winded way of translating a single line. But it demonstrates the way in which translations with an unconscious bias towards the male figure always being the active sexual subject require us to ignore what we know of the language. These translations are endlessly circular, trying to get us back to a rendering that stabilises on male experience. If we work to centre the speaker in our interpretation, we find a range of far more interesting perspectives. Finally, while she may fear her mistress and her pregnancy, this does not take away from the sheer joy of the encounter. The lyrics show, again and again, and pleasure is not destroyed by consequences or social judgement. The interplay of past and present does not overwrite sexual subjectivity.

Critical discussions of *Þis enþer day I mete a clerke*, found in Cambridge, St John's S.54 (259), have largely precluded positive readings of women's sexual subjectivity.[192] In this song, a servant's sexual encounter with a clerk results in an unwanted pregnancy. In order to hide her condition, the woman plans to go away, supposedly on a pilgrimage; she will see out the birth before returning home.

The negative social consequences of an illicit pregnancy have conditioned treatments of the song, with historians such as John Plummer interpreting the burden as an expression of regret:

> A dere god qwat I am fayn,
> For I am madyn now gane.[193]
>
> [Oh, dear God, how glad I am,
> For I am a maiden now again]

[192] 'Þis enþer day I mete a clerke', Cambridge, St John's College MS S.54 (259), fols. 2v-3; DIMEV 5679; EEC, 308; Robbins, *Secular Lyrics*, 18-19.
[193] Ibid., ll. 1-2.

Plummer justifies his interpretation of the burden by reading the second line, 'I am a madyn now gane', as 'I have lost my maidenhead'.[194] John Kerrigan reads even more strongly: 'how worthless I am/ For I am a maiden now pliant'.[195]

Cartlidge offers a rather different interpretation, suggesting that the more likely meaning is 'I am a maiden now again'. Indeed, Cartlidge argues that there is little support in the *Middle English Dictionary* for reading 'gane' as 'gone', rendering such a reading a very thin, indeed non-existent, veil for the speaker's jubilant escape from becoming a social outcast. The speaker appears to be celebrating the restoration of her social status as a virgin, having successfully kept her pregnancy a secret, not unlike the woman who retains her status as a 'maid' in *It was a mayde of brenten ars*.[196] For Cartlidge the cover-up is mischievous, perhaps even nefarious, but we might as readily imbue this expression with palpable relief.

Klinck, in the most recent edition of the text, rejects Cartlidge's reading in favour of 'fayn' as 'vain', and 'gane' as 'gone'.[197] The interchangeability of f/v is of course well known, but in this case 'vayn' is far more often a variant of 'glad' than 'fayn' is for 'vain'.[198] Nevertheless, this potential for double meaning enables the audience to read the poem in ways that transcend the ostensible didacticism, whereby a young woman is justly punished for illicit sex and learns her lesson.[199]

Greene titled this carol *A Betrayed Maiden*, and like Plummer regarded it as a lamentation. He asserted that pregnancy after pilgrimage was a common subject for jest and moralising.

> I xall sey to man & page,
> Þat I haue bene of pylgrymage. [200]

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[194] Plummer, 'The Woman's Song', 143.
[195] *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and 'Female Complaint': A critical anthology*, ed. J. Kerrigan, (Oxford, 1991), 89-90
[196] Cartlidge, 'Representations of Extra-Marital Pregnancy', 396. He compares this song to one of a similar or slightly later date, 'In wilderness/ Ther I founde I Besse', found in two MS, to argue that women might remove themselves from their community for the duration of their pregnancy in order to re-enter it. DIMEV 2666.
[197] A. L. Klinck, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric: An Anthology of Poems ca.1150-1530* (2019), 247-8.
[198] See discussion of 'O Lord so swett Ser John dothe kys' and 'If I be wanton I wotte well why' for further instances of 'fayn' in the sense of glad, below at 139.
[199] S. A. McLoughlin, 'Gender and Transgression in the Late Medieval English Household' (PhD Thesis, University of York, 2011), 89.
[200] 'Þis enþer day I mete a clerke', ll. 15-6.

[I shall say to man and page,
That I have been on pilgrimage]

Yet the speaker's plan to say she has been on pilgrimage is clearly formulated as a response to her pregnancy and as a means to hide it, rather than being its cause: 'qwat xall I say./ I xall sey to man & page'.[201] The burden then appears not so much a lament as a reflection. It is the final perspective on successfully having kept the pregnancy a secret. Rather than facing the censure of the community, the speaker has successfully protected her social virginity, and has faced no consequences for her encounter.

The text also explores different levels of blame towards men. The cleric seduces her with clever words: 'And he was wylly in hys werke', 'I trow he cowd of gramery'.[202] It further appears she has no familial authority figure to caution her about the cleric's likely intentions – 'To warne hys wyll had I no may' – or alternatively, no man to ward off the cleric for her.[203] The performance or reading of these lines could potentially result in significantly differing narratives. The reception could be conspiratorial with the clerk, with either the gullibility or powerlessness of the young woman becoming the focus of ridicule; or the focus might be on the young woman's knowing asides and anticipation of his sexual advances.[204] The ambiguity of the text is perhaps best demonstrated in the closing lines of the final stanza:

Now wyll I not lete[205] for no [r]age,
With me a clerk for to pley.[206]

[Now I will not let/restrain for any desire,
With me a clerk for to play]

'Lete' could, as in line ten, mean 'let' or 'allow', as in 'I won't allow any clerk to play with me – not for any wantonness'. However, Cartlidge suggests that 'lete' could take as its root the Old English

[201] 'Þis enþer day I mete a clerke', ll. 14-15.
[202] Ibid., ll. 4, 7.
[203] Ibid., l. 10. *MED*, may (n.)1. (a) A male kinsman; (b) a parent, male or female.
[204] McLoughlin, 'Gender and Transgression', 87-8.
[205] *MED*, rage (n.) 6. amorous longing or desire. Greene reads [qw]age, reward.
[206] 'This enther day I mete a clerke', ll. 17-8.

'gelettan', 'prevent': 'I won't stop a clerk playing with me'.[207] As such, the carol can be taken to warn of the dangers of fraternising with clerks. But, as Cartlidge identifies, if we interpret the burden as celebrating a positive resolution for the speaker, a second more mischievous message emerges: having escaped censure once, the speaker is likely to seek further illicit encounters.

The text, then, can speak to different purposes. It seems unlikely that its placement in the manuscript between two songs in praise of exemplary virgins, Mary and Catherine, is coincidental. Yet the categorisation of this narrative as a 'lament' appears to be based on a rather earnest reading of the text, itself full of playful innuendo and double entendre that undermines any potential moral message. Instead, we see a fictive woman voicing desires and negotiating her position, while recognising the inherent vulnerability of women within the dynamic of illicit relations and the possible negative outcomes of such encounters.

The speakers of 'Women's songs' offer complex engagements with sex; I will now show that they also engage in parodic play that does not render the women carnivalesque. Rather, the object of their satire is the lament itself. Let's return first to a song we have already seen for its imaginative expression of a variety of sex acts.

Initially, *I have bene a meadene so longe* follows a traditional 'lament' script. Having consummated their relationship – 'Once in his armys he dyd me fonge' – Robin fails to propose marriage, tapping into fears that a woman might agree to intercourse on the understanding that this represents an informal marriage contract, even if marriage is not the goal for this particular speaker.[208] Ultimately, she belies the notion that women regarded intercourse solely as an overture to, or form of, marital contract: when Robin finally speaks, she 'sayde him nay', but does not exclude the possibility that they might, in future, 'play at the trym tram' – a phrase to which we shall return.[209] The narrative of seeking marriage to protect reputation is utterly resisted. This is

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[207] Cartlidge, 'Representations of Extra-Marital Pregnancy', 397.
[208] Ibid., l. 85, ll. 89-91; *MED*, fongen (v.) 1a) 'To grasp, used in reference to lovers'; Cases of breach of marriage contract demonstrate the widespread nature of the practice of consummation before official exchange of vows, see McSheffrey, *Love and Marriage in Late Medieval London*, 42-43.
[209] 'I have bene a meadene so longe', l. 101.

emphasised by the repetition of the refrain at the end of the poem, 'I have byn a meaden so longe', proclaiming virginity even as she declares herself a 'horsone callote' [whoreson harlot].[210] This final repetition is reminiscent of the structure of *Þis enper day I mete a clerke*, where the reality of the sexual status of a 'maiden' is thrown into doubt while her reputation as a virgin (an unmarried girl) is upheld as an ideal and remains intact.[211]

San Marino, CA, Huntington Library MS EL 34.B.60 is mostly a mix of old tenures, but on fols. 11-11v are two verses, with evidence of the direct engagement of at least one other reader.[212] Of interest here is *O lord so swett Ser John dothe kys* (fol. 11).[213] In this text, the refrain 'I haue no powre to say hym nay' [I have no power to tell him "no"] teasingly emphasizes the inversion of the narrative that women's bodies can be bought with favours. In this case, the speaker is already enthusiastically involved with 'Sir John', a name commonly used to represent a parish priest:

> O Lord so swett S[er] John dothe kys,
> At ev[er]y tyme when he wolde pley,
> Off hym selfe so plesant he ys,
> I have no powre to say hym nay.[214]
>
> [Oh Lord, so sweet Sir John does kiss,
> At every time when he would play,[215]
> Of his person (lit. himself) so pleasing he is,
> I have no power to tell him "no".]

The speaker's love is mutual and increasing:

> Ser John love me & I love hym,
> The more I ~~lo~~ love hym the more I maye,
> He says Swett hart, cum kys me ~~krym~~ trym,
> I have no powre to say hym nay.[216]

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[210] 'whoreson harlot'; 'I have bene a meadene so longe', l. 98.
[211] See above, 132.
[212] San Marino, CA, Henry Huntington Library MS EL 34.B.60. The main body of the text is likely written by Robert Furthe, see signature f.6, in England towards the middle-end of fifteenth century. See guide. The signature at the top of f.11r, 'I Rychard Brokysby' is the same hand as that of the texts fols. 11-11v.
[213] The other is f. 11v, *I must go walk the wood so wild* written in the same hand, about a banished lover.
[214] 'O lord so swett Ser John dothe kys', San Marino, CA, Henry Huntington Library EL 34.B.60 fol. 11; DIMEV 3971; Robbins, *Secular Lyrics* 20-21; MELC, 284; ll. 2-5.
[215] MED pleien v. 2(a) To play amorously; make love, engage in sexual intercourse.
[216] 'O lord so swett Ser John dothe kys', ll. 6-9.

[Sir John loves me, and I love him,
The more I love him, the more I may,
He says "Sweetheart, come kiss me nicely",
I have no power to tell him "no".]

It is only then that they begin to hint at some kind of remuneration:

S[er] John to me is p[ro]feryng ,
For hys pleasure right well to pay,
& in my box he putt[es] hys offryng,
[I have no powre to say hym nay]. [217]

[Sir John to me is proffering,
For his pleasure right well to pay,
And in my box he puts his offering,
I have no power to tell him "no".]

At this point it is tempting to consider that the speaker has entered into an arrangement that she has no ability to avoid. Indeed, we see this in action in other cases where money is exchanged.[218] Yet, the speaker repeats 'me/my' consistently through the poem, and does so more than any other 'Women's song'. This constant assertion of ownership, along with the playful innuendo 'my box', using the conventional image of the priest's offering box to show how their usual dynamic has been reversed, is of a very different tone to texts that lament the inescapability of a non-consensual sexual entrapment.[219] The next stanza helps us get further in this reading:

S[er] John ys taken in my mouse trappe,
Fayne wolde I haue hem bothe nyght [a]nd day,
He gropith so nyslye abought my ~~playe~~[220] lape,
I have no po[w]re to sa[y hym nay. [221]

[Sir John is taken in my mousetrap,
Gladly would I have him[222] both night and day,

[217] 'O lord so swett Ser John dothe kys', ll. 10-13
[218] L. Akard, 'Rape, Victimhood, and Responses to Rape in Later Medieval France' (PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2022), presents legal testimonies where survivors of sexual violence are immediately forced to take money as an attempt to disguise rape as sex work.
[219] See below for example, 'The last tyme the well-ey woke', 148.
[220] This accidental repetition from the first stanza may suggest that this text is copied rather than composed or written from oral memory. This could also be read mischievously, where the scribe trips between the sexual connotations of both 'playe' and 'lape'. See this also at n. 231 between 'kys' and 'trym'.
[221] 'O lord so swett Ser John dothe kys', ll. 14-17.
[222] Barabara Hanawalt here reads 'I would have men both night and day', and reads this as a lesson for men 'fagged out' by too much sexual activity, in her *Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1982), 192.

He strokes [lit. gropes][223] so nicely about my lap/vulva,[224]
I have no power to tell him "no".]

As yet, it seems no literal 'payment' has taken place. Rather, Sir John is engaging in foreplay, an exchange that is pleasurable rather than pecuniary. He pays 'right well', and she would happily let him pay 'nyght and day'. Note that Sir John never forces himself – he asks her to kiss him, and proffers himself. Meanwhile, the speaker 'take[s]', and 'ha[s] him'. What are we to make of the burden, then, which is meant to be our guide to reading?

Hey noney
I wyll loue oure Ser Iohn & I loue eny

[Hey nonny,
I will love our Sir John if I love any]

The celebrative 'Hey noney', combined with the speaker's defiant 'I will', undermines any attempt to read this text as someone who has not consented. It is only in the last stanza that the speaker refers literally to gifts:

S[er] John geuyth me relyus ryng[es],
W[i]th praty plesure for to assay,
Furres off the ~~fynert~~ fynest w[i]th othyr,
thynges,[225]
[I haue no powre to say hym nay]. [226]

[Sir John gives me shining rings,
In order to tempt/have sex[227] with pretty pleasure,
Furs of the finest with other things,
I have no power to tell him "no".]

But it is important to pay attention to how the gifts are given, in conjunction with 'praty plesure' ('asssaien' has the double meaning of sex and temptation) to induce the speaker to accept them. While again it is possible to read that Sir John is giving gifts in place of gaining her consent, this does not really fit with what we have seen throughout the poem. Alternatively, it has been

[223] MED gropen v. 1 (a) To feel with the hand or fingers, touch, stroke. 'Gropes' is the literal translation, but has far more pejorative, predatory associations in the modern sense than in the medieval.
[224] MED lappe n. 6(a) (b) the female pudendum; *pl.* lappes, the lips of the pudendum [vulva].
[225] The script runs at an angle, and runs out of space on the line.
[226] 'O lord so swett Ser John dothe kys', ll. 18-21.
[227] MED assaien v. 8) tempt, or 5) have intercourse with.

suggested that this final stanza reveals the speaker's material motivations, where 'I haue no powre to say hym nay' is a cynical or comic gesture – 'how could I possibly refuse'. Yet the speaker has already told us that their encounters are so satisfying she 'loves' him more and more, and throughout the text it is always the promise of sexual gratification that leaves her unable to refuse his advances. Here, it is pleasure that is the means to tempt her to take his 'gifts', and not vice versa.

The implicit value or meaning of the gifts is key. As a priest, Sir John cannot offer marriage – nor has there been any indication that the speaker wishes their circumstances were otherwise. Her unwillingness to receive his gifts may, then, be a recognition of the superficiality of any implicit promise to commitment. The speaker's burden, '& I loue eny', when read alongside this sentiment, appears as an expression that if she will love anyone, it will be Sir John, but she cannot marry him, and she is not going to commit to loving him simply because he has given her gifts, or because she has had sex with him.

Paying attention to words matters, especially in uncovering signifiers for sex acts and women's active sexuality. Shifting our attention away from dominant discourse does some of the work for us, as the texts here have shown, because they can destabilise the conflation of misogynistic ideas with the totality of the social-sexual landscape. Furthermore, it is not so straightforward to read many moments in these texts as obscene. Their punning and innuendo are light and playful, campy even – but the woman is never the butt of the joke.[228] When body parts and specific acts are more explicitly described, it does not seem to be structured to shock. Rather, the voices here speak to a developed and varied language in the vernacular for women's sexual choices and pleasure, with widely recognisable and evocative images.[229]

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[228] Klinck argues that the mixture of innuendo and graphic language of 'O lord so swett Ser John dothe kys', 'suggests male glee and a male intended audience', for which see Klinck, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric*, 235.

[229] Intertextuality, from a broadly structuralist or semiotic perspective, has at its core the assumption that all communication is dependent on mutual understanding of codes and conventions between communicants. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes outlined five lost codes of implicit knowledge, where it is precisely

The songs explored in this section use laments as a cultural and literary reference, but play on them to create something new. They push the genre to its limits, until the lament speaks against itself. This is precisely because laments cannot describe the fullness and complexity of women's sexual subjectivity. By assuming that the fictive women must be the object of pity and ridicule, or else transgressing boundaries, we have simply taken the play the wrong way.

MYNYON TRIM: THE FEMALE GAZE

In *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day*, sex begins at first sight. The speaker's eye contact signals her availability, and she appreciatively describes the body of the object of her gaze.[230] A similar trajectory occurs in *As I went on ȝol day in owre procession*.[231] The object of the fictive woman's desire is the clerk at her church. We track her gaze while she objectifies his every office, but in particular his skill in singing the liturgy:

> Jankyn at þe Sanctus crakit a merie note,
> & me þinkyt it dos me good – I payid for his cote.[232]
>
> [Jankin during the Sanctus trills a merry note,
> And I think it does me good – I paid for his coat.]

In a remarkable role reversal, as the speaker enjoys her lover's trilling: she takes pleasure in hearing him sing. She further reflects on the positive impact of the pleasurable view on her wellbeing, and justifies her looking because she maintains him financially.[233] The theme of simultaneous appreciation of beauty and ascertaining sexual availability through looking minimally subverts the

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the relation to other texts that renders literature intelligible. He means lost in the sense that their origin is unknown, their use therefore to some extent neutral or naive. Ann Jefferson offers the critique that by viewing texts in these terms, the reader is solely a passive consumer. See A. Jefferson, 'Intertextuality and the Poetics of Fiction', *Comparative Criticism 2*, ed. E. Shaffer (Cambridge, 1980), 235-50, at 235-6.

230 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', ll. 9-12; see above, 127-30.

231 'As I went on ȝol day in owre procession', London, British Library MS Sloane 2593, fol. 34; DIMEV 635; EEC 309.

232 'As I went on ȝol day in owre procession', ll. 16-17.

233 Klinck finds this song to be 'snide, if jaunty', and 'created by clerics for a male audience'. See Klinck, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric*, 233.

male gaze and sense of ownership, and maximally demonstrates that in social imagination women were active sexual subjects because they could look, and gain gratification in so doing.

There are certain literary structures to gazing. Meeting a sexually attractive figure of any gender in medieval Latin and European vernacular romance and lyric poetry often begins with *descriptio*: a head-to-toe explication of how the object of desire meets a set of aesthetic ideals.[234] In the Latin tradition there are far more feminine than masculine objects. But in vernacular romances or blazon – poems that praise aspects of the subject's attractiveness – a hero's beauty might be given as much space as that of a heroine.[235]

The late fifteenth-century pastoral handbook of cleric John Gysborne, London, British Library MS Sloane 1584, parodies blazon poetry by substituting a noble object with a celebration of the beauty of male servants.[236] In *Off servyng men I wyll begyne* the speaker is anonymous, but we might make a connection between these lyrics and the handbook's earlier confessional directions for women servants and singlewomen about lechery and fornication.[237]

The speaker describes an ideal serving man, beginning with his scarlet cap and jet-black hair, then working downwards: he wears a fine doublet and 'tryme' shirt with a 'tryme' coat; his hose are fashionable (and expensive) black.[238] We might expect the speaker to continue to his calves or shoes. Not so: she fixates on the hose, because 'In hyme ther ys no lack' [In him there is no lack].[239] This disruption in the lyric's generic form is further emphasised by the abrupt return

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234 In western European literary traditions this is often predicated on whiteness, for which see J. de Weever, *Sheba's Daughters: whitening and demonizing the Saracen woman in medieval French epic* (New York, 1998).
235 For more on the progression of the blazon tradition into Middle English, see J. D. Burnley, *Courtliness and Literature in Medieval England* (London, 1998), 37-8; Also P. A. Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: rhetoric, gender, property* (London, 1987), 127-8. Parker reads the blazon tradition as inseparable from merchandising rhetoric, where dividing a whole into its aspects amplifies its value with a purpose to sell.
236 'Off servyng men I wyll begyne', London, British Library MS Sloane 1584, fol. 45v; DIMEV 4208; EEC 303-4.
237 London, British Library MS Sloane 1584, fols. 7v-10r, separates out women, servant women, and singlewomen for their spiritual direction.
238 'Off servyng men I wyll begyne', ll. 19-25; The reference to 'London' to describe the dye could suggest an urban context, but equally may simply serve to demonstrate that this serving man has been well-dressed by the head of his household.
239 'Off servyng men I wyll begyne', l. 27.

to safer ground – his manly face.[240] Just as this lyric parodies the blazon, so too the chorus mocks the idea that pleasure necessarily leads to sorrow for singlewomen:

> So well ys me begone
> Troly, lole,
> So well ys me begone,
> Troly, loly.[241]
>
> [So lucky[242] am I,
> Trolly lolly[243]
> So lucky am I,
> Trolly lolly]

It would be hard to read the phrase 'well ys me be gone' as anything but a play on 'wo-bigon', the expression of being distressed or wretched so commonly attributed to women who have lost all through sexual misadventure in laments.[244]

Carissa Harris has spoken to the ways in which the head-to-toe description of this lyric fits into a pattern of marketplace symbols in 'Women's songs', where the desirability of the serving man as a lover is explicitly given pecuniary value: his 'kysse is worth a hundred pounde'.[245] The deployment of mercantile language is certainly an important strand, but here I want to draw attention to how the female gaze is configured as specifically sexual via the word 'tryme' [trim], which we have already seen is used multiple times to refer to his appearance.

Editors translate 'tryme' as 'nicely', 'neatly', or 'smartly'. These are appropriate translations, but the first instance of the word in this lyric should alert us to a sexual meaning. The speaker says serving men 'goo mynyon trym', which Harris translates as 'smartly dressed like a court favourite', and Klinck as 'elegantly neat'.[246] These glosses appear to be based on the rather conservative

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240 Ibid, l. 29.
241 Ibid., ll. 1-4.
242 MED bigon v. 3(b) wel~, lucky, well off; happy, cheerful.
243 MED trolli lolli interj. a refrain expressing gaiety or idle abandon.
244 See Chaucer, 'The Romaunt of the Rose', in *Riverside Chaucer*, l. 336; 'The Legend of Pope Gregory', in *Die Mittelenglische Gregoriuslegende*, ed. C. Keller (Heidelberg, 1914), 46, l. 236
245 'Off servyng men I wyll begyne', ll. 23; Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 171.
246 Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 171, glosses as 'like a social climber' at 237; also Klinck, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric*, 251.

translation by the *MED* of the Old French *mignon*, from which it is derived.[247] *Mignon* can be taken several ways, but here the most relevant translations are 'cute', 'cute one', or 'lover'.

Given the structural building of sexual tension and this usage next to 'mynyon', it seems to me that we should also consider a further meaning of 'trim' throughout the lyric. 'Trim' is also a sexual term, familiar to early modern scholars, but missed entirely in relation to Middle English texts.[248] It does not easily translate into modern English, but appears to operate similarly to 'fuck', not with the same expletive strength, but in the sense that it can be used flexibly and imaginatively, like 'to fuck', 'fuckable', or indeed 'fuck you'.[249] It is both explicit and open to different readings. For example, when the fictive woman in *I have bene a meadene so longe* suggests that although she will not marry her lover, but they might continue to 'play at the trym tram', this could simply be a playful flirtatious game, or a suggestion that they can continue a physical relationship without the intention of marrying.[250] Although this meaning of the word is absent from the *MED*, there are Middle English instances of its use. In the c. 1250 *Middle English Genesis and Exodus*, 'trim' is twice used as a verb for conception.[251] When applied here, it radically affects the meaning and punning potential of the lyrics:

> Off servyng men I wyll begyne,
> Troly, loley,
> For they goo mynyon trym,
> Troly, loley.[252]
>
> [Of serving men I will begin,
> Trolly, lolly,

[247] MED minion n. 1 a favourite; DMF mignon adj. and subtst. masc. a) (Celui/celle) qui a de la grâce, de la délicatesse, qui est coquet, aimiable; b) subt.ami, amant.
[248] Gordon Williams suggests that 'trim' in this sense may stem from to till or cultivate land, recorded from the early sixteenth century. Williams gives several examples of later usage, but the following is contemporary with 'Mynyon go trym': Skelton's bawd in the morality play *Magnyfycence* (c. 1515-16), l. 1344, 'places herself amongst the righteous (Matthew 25:35): "It is great almesse the hungre to fede/ To clothe the nakyd where is lackynge a smocke - Trymme at her tayle or a man can turne a socke".' See G. Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, (3 vols., London, 2000), iii, 1422-3.
[249] Although 'trim' is not expletive, other potential translations such as 'screw' do not quite convey the range of meanings shared by 'trim' and 'fuck'.
[250] 'I have bene a meadene so longe', see above, 109-11.
[251] *The Story of Genesis and Exodus, an Early English Song, About A.D. 1250*, ed. R. Morris (London, 1873), l. 1024; l. 1198.
[252] 'Off servyng men I wyll begyne', ll. 5-8.

For they go like nice/fuckable lovers
Trolly, lolly.]

This reading is even more convincing when placed in conversation with another lyric, *Mynyon go trym go trym*, which was printed in 1530 with notation in STC 22924, *XX Songes, Impryntyd in London at the […] signe of the Black Morens*.[253] This part book contains several songs with groups of speakers of all genders, often in conversation, and with sexual themes: *Bewar my lytyl fynger syr I yow desyre* describes an amorous encounter; *We be maydyns fayr & gent* celebrates a crowd of women's vulvas; and *A pretty wenche may be plesur* encourages servants to spend their earnings on pretty women (who are described as the 'mynyon sort').[254] The chorus of the present lyric is as follows:

Mynyon go trym go trym
& mynyon go trym go trym
thys ys a song
thes men among
of mynyon go trym.[255]

[Lover go trim go trim
and lover go trim go trim
this is a song
these men among
of [a] lover [who] go[es] trim.]

The 'Mynyon' here is a 'trim' lover who, like the serving man, is sleekly dressed in black: he is 'freshe as any jay'.[256] He is with a 'mastres sanspere' [mistress without peer], who is also 'trim', perhaps meaning attractive and/or sexually available.[257] The speaker calls themself a 'mynyon' when they drink wine, sing, and dance. Throughout the song, then, 'trim' operates in several modes: the lover is 'trim' in the sense of sexually attractive, but he also 'trim[s]'.

[253] 'Mynyon go trym go trym', STC 22924, *XX Songes, Impryntyd in London at the […] signe of the Black Morens*, Item 9. Appendix I, 16. DIMEV 5732; NIMEV TP 1911.5; E. Flügel, 'Liedersammlungen des XXVI Jahrhunderts, Besonders aus der Zeit Heinrichs VIII', *Anglia* 12 (1889), 585-97, at 592-3. (See also J. Milsom, 'Songs and Society in Early Tudor London', *Early Music History* 16 (1997), 235-293, at 289-90 (extract only).
[254] DIMEV 6851, 6162, 146.
[255] 'Mynyon go trym go trym', ll. 1-5.
[256] Ibid., l. 8.
[257] 'Mynyon go trym go trym', l. 18.

The female gaze in *Off servying men I wyll begyne* is appreciative and active, but far from indiscriminate: the 'trimmability' of the man is specific. The lyrics that deploy 'trim' have suffered from under-reading, but with the full potential of the word reinstated, they become a copia of desiring and desirability.

WANTON WARE: CELEBRATING AVAILABILITY

I turn now to texts that celebrate sexual availability, using marketplace metaphors. In particular, we focus here on the word 'ware', which was used euphemistically to refer to genitals. The use of 'ware' to mean vulva is discussed by Janelle Werner.[258] She suggests that commodifying women's sexuality could be an empowering choice.[259] It could carry market associations of haggling, indeed of being up for sale – but also potentially of worth and desirability. In a range of Middle English lyrics, 'ware' can describe a woman's assets, or what she has to offer, as well as operating as a euphemism.

In the early fifteenth-century *At the northe ende of selver white*, the speaker's lover tries to persuade her to stay with him.[260] She agrees, and lays out her 'ware', only to find that he is not an effective lover. The song takes the cumulative form, characterised by a simple repeated verse with modifications for easy memorisation in a group context:

> At the northe ende of Selver White,
> My lef me bat,
> At the northe ende of Selver White,
> My lef me bat I scholde abide.
> I leyde my ware[261], a bogeler brode,
> & ever he smote,
> I leyde my ware, a bogeler brode,

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[258] Werner, 'Romance and Finance', 31-4; 'Ware' was also used to refer to the penis, for which see 'Leve, lystenes to me', MS Brogyntyn ii.I, fols. 56-59.
[259] In one song voiced by a chapman, the male figure puns on ware by asking women to 'bey sum ware of me' [buy some wares from me], which can also be read as 'be wary of me'. Market language, then, was not restricted to women. see 'We ben chapmen lyght of fote', British Library MS Sloane 2593, fol. 26v-27, l. 6; DIMEV 6163, EEC 279.
[260] 'At the northe ende of selver white', Cambridge, Cambridge University Additional MS 5943, fol. 170v; DIMEV 719; M. S. Luria and R. L. Hoffman, *Middle English Lyrics* (New York, 1974), 88-9.
[261] MED ware, n. (2); 3. *Fig.* The female pudendum [vulva].

& ever he smote by side.
Shall ther never man justy therat,
But ȝyf he can –
Shall ther[262] never a man justy therat,
But yf he can it smite.[263]

[At the north end of Silver White,
My love bid me –
At the north end of Silver White,
My love bid me that I should abide.
I laid out my ware, a buckler [small shield][264] wide,
And ever he smote –
I laid out my ware, a buckler wide,
And ever he smote by side.
Shall never a man joust thereat,
Unless he can –
Shall never a man joust thereat,
Unless he can it smite.]

Over the following verses, her ware is laid out increasingly wide, from a 'peckel' [peck] to a 'bushelle' [bushel].[265] The speaker thus opens her legs wider and wider, and mocks her lover's inability to 'joust' with precision – no matter how 'broad' the target.[266] Each verse reaffirms the message that a man is simply not worth the time if he cannot satisfy. Unlike the ambiguous narratives of carols, there is no room here for multiple meanings, moralizing, warning, or denial.

Another context in which 'ware' describes sexual value is *If I be wanton I wotte well why* (c.1500).[267] A woman celebrates her single status and the attractiveness of her 'ware', perhaps here her vulva, repeatedly describing it as 'prety' and 'wanton'.[268] The chorus repeats that her 'ware' will

262 MED: eth(e), adv; 2. As intensive.
263 'At the northe ende of selver white', ll. 1-12; Among the various owners is one 'hennyngis harper' (fol. 5v), potentially suggestive of its use in performance. See Palti, 'Synge we now alle and sum', 185, n. 10.
264 MELC, 285; This euphemism for the vulva is also present in other medieval literatures: for Middle Scots, see Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 95-6, and for French and Arabic, S. Amer, *Crossing Borders*, 36.
265 Robbins points out that these measures might also be regarded as puns, as they contain variations on potentially suggestive verbs: 'buck', MED bukking ger. 1 the rut; 'peck', MED pekken v 1(b) to pick, pluck; and 'buss', MED busshen v.2 1(a) to push, thrust. See Robbins, *Secular Lyrics*, 236.
266 For sexual connotations of jousting outside of a Middle English context, see Etienne de Fougères, *Le Livre des Manières*. ed. A. R. Lodge (Genève, 1979), 98, ll. 1117-20.
267 'If I be wanton I wotte well why', London, British Library Harley 7578, fol. 105v; DIMEV 2101; First edited in Fehr, 'Weitere Beiträge zur englischen Lyric', 58; see also Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 165-8, for a recent treatment and edition.
268 'If I be wanton I wotte well why', l. 5.

walk for her, which speaks to a kind of public attention, where her genitalia might wander, process, even be famed.[269] There are several medieval contexts in which genitals wander: pilgrimage badges depicting disembodied genitalia embarking on journeys are well known, but *fabliaux* also make use of the trope to tell tales of sexually adventurous genitalia that separate from their human to make their own way.[270] This simultaneously endorses and contrasts with the connotations of walking abroad in Chapter One. In this text, wantonness does not have to signal ill fame. Harris has drawn attention to the speaker's claim that she knows 'nobody wyll do me ill' [nobody will harm/injure me], and sees this is an expression of denial of 'the dangers of living as a young woman in an unequal world', an important recognition of the rounded and realistic vision that lyric offers.[271]

The speaker is uninterested in marriage: she 'wold fayn tary another year' [would gladly wait another year].[272] The musings that if she was married she would 'bi glade', and that she may 'well ffortune sum man to find' further suggest that the speaker simply is not ready to settle for one partner just yet – and presumably that being sexually active will not harm her chances of marriage.[273] The repeated 'tygh' creates a jumble of bodies and acts which even the scribe stumbles over:

> I wyll nott spare to ~~wy w~~[t] tygh yow
> He tygh he tygh he tygh he[274]
>
> [I will not refrain from touching you
> He touches he touches he touches]

Harris argues for reading 'touches' here on the basis of the manuscript's Northern dialect; we might additionally read a euphemistic 'thing'.[275] The stanzas, meanwhile, include adjectival play:

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269 Ibid., l. 3.
270 For pilgrimage badges, see B. Reiss, 'Pious Phalluses and Holy Vulvas: The Religious Importance of Some Sexual Body-Part Badges in Late-Medieval Europe (1200-1550)', *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 6:1 (2017), 151-176. For tales of wandering genitalia, see A. M. Rasmussen, 'Wandering Genitalia: Sexuality and the Body in German Culture Between the Late Middle Ages and Early Modernity', *KCLMS Occasion Publications* 2 (2009), 1-28.
271 'If I be wanton I wotte well why', l. 21; Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 166.
272 'If I be wanton I wotte well why', l. 2.
273 Ibid., ll. 17-18.
274 Ibid., ll. 7-8.
275 Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 167; MED thing n. 13a. b)

I am a woman I may be bold
though I be lyttyll yett am I old[276]

[I am a woman, I may be bold
Though I am young, yet I am experienced[277]]

If the speaker is to settle for a male partner, he must be 'of gentyll nature' – a description which she then uses for herself in the next stanza, 'I will be gentyll come when ye wyll'.[278] The ungendered use of adjectives supports the undermining of gender norms in a sexual context.

The 'ware' lyrics employ the language of the marketplace; for Harris, the speaker uses 'ware' for its associations with 'commodity or merchandise offered for sale to portray her vulva as valuable and vendible'.[279] But this does not straightforwardly suggest that the speaker is for sale. We have seen that in *At the northe ende of selver white*, the message is one of mutual exchange: the lover must bring something worth having. The speaker of *If I be wanton I wotte well why* takes this even further. It is clear that she in no way has to settle, or see her 'ware' as less valuable because she is sexually active. She sings of her ability to choose whom she engages with sexually, as well as whom she will marry, and when.

A SOCIAL SCRIPT FOR CONSENT AND NON-CONSENT

Thus far we have dealt almost entirely with songs about women who are sexually active, and are enthusiastic participants in sexual encounters. This raises the spectre of male fantasy – of tropes we have seen in Chapter One – of putative female insatiability, and inability to refuse sex once sexually active. Some of the songs here do directly problematise these ideas, such as the maiden of *I have bene a meadene so long* who is a desiring subject although she is not yet sexually active. But while we can see the ways in which depictions of enthusiastic consent could be empowering by providing a sexual script that does not value passivity or sexual violence, we have not yet

276 'If I be wanton I wotte well why', ll. 12-13.
277 MED, old(e) (adj.) 1c. a) Mature, experienced.
278 'If I be wanton I wotte well why', ll. 18, 20.
279 Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 167.

encountered these women refusing a sexual encounter in real time, in their own voice. And there are examples. The songs examined below offer a series of strategies for avoiding, resisting, and surviving unwanted sex.

In one short song, *Ie haue so longe kepe schepe on the grene*, which appears with its musical setting in Bodleian Library Douce 381, we are presented with a somewhat positive view of potential outcomes when rejecting romantic gestures.[280] A woman addresses her prospective lover, Wilkin. Evidently he has been wheedling for sex, to the point that he claims that his 'hert ys sa forhew'.[281] The speaker doubts that he is sincere. While 'somme wolde' believe his entreaties, she rebuffs him:

> 3e may, Wilkyn, wyt rye strawys twyne,
> And pypy as you lyst,
> On yowre songe sayth ye loue me best,
> Ywys, and moste on yowere thowht.
> But that ye seye ye wol for loue dye,
> Arys vppon the morne and lust for to pleye.[282]
>
> [You may, Wilkin, with rye straws two [a shepherd's pipe],
> And pipe[283] as you will,
> Though your song says you love me best,
> Surely, and most on your mind.
> But though you say you will die for love,
> [You] arise in the morning and lust for to play.[284]]

He has tried all his best game: he has played his pipe for her. He has written her love songs promising to love her or die. But rendering his efforts in wooing her inconsequential, indeed a little pathetic, she delivers a final blow to this would-be minstrel: 'Thys may ryme wel but hyt a

[280] 'Ie haue so longe kepe schepe on the grene', Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 381, fol. 20v, l. 12; DIMEV 6823; For a transcription of the music, see *Early Bodleian Music: Sacred and Secular Songs, Together with Other MS. Compositions in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ranging from about A.D. 1185 to about A.D. 1505*, ed. J. C. Stainer et al (2 vols., London, 1901), ii, 54-5.
[281] [heart is so scorned/rejected]; 'Ie haue so longe kepe schepe on the grene', l. 2.
[282] Ibid., ll. 5-10.
[283] MED pipen v. 1.(d) say (stm.) in a shrill or piping voice.
[284] MED pleien v. 1(a) to play amorously; make love; engage in sexual intercourse

corde nouht' [This may rhyme well - but it agrees not].[285] The joy of this text is that there is no violent reaction, no threat. The man appears to have accepted her rejection.

Other songs far more explicitly deal with the dangers of men for whom consent is irrelevant. In each lyric, a woman rejects a man's sexual advances, in no uncertain terms, whether *spoken* or *felt*. This in itself tells us something important about how medieval people thought about non-consent as something that did not necessarily have to be expressed to be real. I argue that each lyric here comprises a serious engagement with concepts of sexual violence, and that these are structured to demonstrate variously the agitation of unwanted advances, methods of de-escalation, recognising danger, and the pain and violation of assault.

In *The last tyme the well-ey woke*, a woman is at a social gathering when she is approached by 'Ser John', a priest.[286] Ser John prevents her from leaving, then threatens her with excommunication, forcing her to take an oath of silence.[287] The following encounter is unequivocally rape:

> Yet he did me a wel wors turne:
> He leyde my hed agayn the burne;
> He gafe my maydenhed a spurne
> And rofe my kell-ey.[288]
>
> [Yet he did me a much worse turn:
> He put[289] my head against the well;
> He gave my maidenhead a great blow (lit. spurne)
> and tore[290] my hymen – alas![291]]

The violent tone is clear. Harris has suggested we could read 'kell' as 'calle' or caul, an anatomical term defined in the *MED* as an 'enveloping membrane', which she understands to mean the

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285 'Ie haue so longe kepe schepe on the grene', l. 11.
286 'The last tyme I the wel woke', Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff.5.48, fol. 114v; DIMEV 5369; EEC, 309; Robbins, *Secular Lyrics*, 19-20.
287 'The last tyme I the wel woke', l. 3-6.
288 Ibid., l. 7-10.
289 MED leien v.1 1(a) to put; the phonetic 'laid' is tempting here, but has connotations of gentleness that it seems fitting to avoid.
290 MED riven v.2 1(a) to tear.
291 MED ei interj. 1(a) an exclamation with anger.

hymen.[292] We have further seen 'kelle' used in Chapter One in liturgical dramas to refer to a loose woman; this may suggest a wider matrix of meanings where the supposed anatomy of virginity becomes slang for sex work.[293]

The priest then further appears to abuse his clerical privileges and the trust of the community by gaining access to the speaker in her home to facilitate further encounters that are presented as pleasurable:

> Fro evensong tyme til light of the day;
> We made as mery as flowres in May;
> I was begyled-ay.[294]
>
> [From evensong til light of the day
> We made as merry as flowers in May
> I was beguiled.]

Here, the picture is complicated by the change in the speaker's tone towards the priest. Her 'beguilement' plays into the trope of the conquered woman, at first resistant to advances but then accepting or indeed enthusiastic. For some readers, the subsequent pregnancy of the speaker could even be interpreted as confirmation of sexual pleasure. However, there is real ambivalence in the manner in which the speaker responds to her pregnancy:

> I go with childe wel I wot
> I schrew the fadur that hit gate
> Withouten he fynde hit mylke and pap
> A long while-ey.
>
> [I go with child, I know for certain,
> I curse the father that begot it
> Unless he finds it milk and pap
> For a long time.]

[292] Harris, 'Teen Moms', 7, for 'kell' as 'hymen'. This line has been the subject of some transcription debate, with some editors reading 'bell', as in 'bele chose', for which see EEC 309; MELC 283. Robbins, *Secular Lyrics*, 19-20 reads 'kell' as meaning maidenhead; Klink has recently come to the same transcription, but translates as 'keel', making an argument for reading this as a euphemism, as in 'split my keel'. This seems to me to be on less sure ground. See Klink, *The Voices of Medieval Lyric*, 352.
[293] See Chapter One, 51, 87, for uses of 'kell'; MED cites 'kelis' as 'ill-bred people'.
[294] 'The last tyme I the wel woke', ll. 12-4.

By placing blame for the pregnancy with her assailant, she expresses that he ought to be made responsible for his actions by providing maintenance. Although this woman's sexuality is depicted as being awoken by a man's violence, the piece is very far from an uncomplicated male fantasy. The woman's lamenting is about rape, not sex; and inasmuch as it is about pregnancy it too does not quite fit the 'fallen woman' theme so beloved of the early editors, as the speaker blames her assailant and not her own behaviour.[295]

I turn now to three lyrics, which together which in addition to documenting non-consent and coercion, form a final important corrective to claims that 'Women's songs' only serve male fantasy. *In wylderness* is an unambiguous lament in response to assault and abandonment.[296] *Be pes ye make me spill my ale* and *I can be wanton & yf I will* are attempts to escape sexual violence written in the form of present-tense reported speech: in the former, we hear both halves of the conversation; in the latter, we hear only the woman's part.[297] All three lyrics are notated, and the manuscript of *In wylderness* and *Be pes ye make me spill my ale* precociously so, in polyphonic form from the third quarter of the fifteenth century up to c. 1510.

In wylderness, found in London, British Library MSS Additional 5665 and Egerton 3002, overlaps significantly with the themes of *Þis enþer day I mete a clerke*, but the key distinction between the texts is the fictive woman's consent, with intensely diverging effects. In this lament, a young woman in 'grete dystres/ Remedyles' wanders alone in the woods.[298] She relates that she was maiden when 'at-a-brayde/ Y was afrayde' [suddenly and violently/ I was attacked].[299] The speaker describes the disorientating experience of the man turning to 'words mylde' after the assault.[300]

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[295] See laments of one's own actions above, 125.
[296] 'In wylderness', London, British Library, MSS Additional 5665, fol. 141r, and Egerton 3002 fol. 2v; DIMEV 2666; B. Fehr, 'Die Lieder der Hs. Add. 5665 (Ritson's Folio-MS)', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 106 (1901), 262-85, at 283. Fragment (one stanza) also in London, British Library Egerton 3002, fol. 2v.
[297] 'Be pes ye make me spill my ale', London, British Library, MS Additional 5665, fols. 66v-67; DIMEV 773, Ritson, *Ancient Songs*, 102-4. 'I can be wanton & yf I wyl', Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole 176, fol. 98v; DIMEV 2145; Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 243.
[298] 'In wylderness', ll. 3-4.
[299] Ibid, ll.10-11.
[300] Ibid, l. 14.

Having successfully 'begyled' her, the 'wanton' assailant disappears, leaving her to face the consequences.[301] But instead, like the speaker of *Þis enþer day I mete a clerke* who plans to go on pilgrimage to hide her pregnancy, she escapes censure by travelling alone and friendless to a 'ferre cuntre' [faraway country] where men think she is 'A mayde agayn'.[302] But in contrast to the song of pleasure, it is clear that for this speaker social virginity cannot take back what has happened to her. She cannot forget:

> Lefe of my woe
> With gode devyse
> And let hym go
> With sorrow also
> And play the wyse[303]
>
> [Leave off my woe
> With good judgement
> And let him go
> With sorrow also
> And play the wiser]

This woman seeks no redress – perhaps because this would be futile – but seeks to move on from her woe and sorrow, and exercise more awareness in future encounters. This is a deeply nuanced recognition that justice was likely rarely available to survivors of sexual assault. We are left with her chorus of loneliness and despair, though she is not without resources, solutions, and strategies. She has fled to preserve her reputation, and sings to relieve her suffering. It seems clear that when medieval composers of lyrics sought to depict sexual violence, there was a developed language and set of circumstances to draw upon. In this fictive recounting, perhaps the catharsis is in the telling, where even conflicting emotional responses can be heard together. Finally, this lyric does not support the approach of reading as a 'cautionary tale', as there is nothing to suggest that the woman had behaved inappropriately prior to being assaulted – it is only after the event that she wanders

[301] Ibid, l. 16.
[302] Ibid, ll. 28-30.
[303] Ibid, ll. 20-24.

in the wilderness. Rather, the lyric concentrates on her suffering and reflection after a horrible and inexplicable event.

Catharsis and survival strategies are also voiced by the fictive woman of *Be pes ye make me spill my ale* is accosted in an indistinct location: she has ale and describes the space as her own, so we might expect a tavern where she works; or given the threat that her mother may see his attack, a house. In either context, the man has evidently followed the woman into a private space, as she asks him 'What do ye here within oure spence' [storeroom].[304] The lyric explores a range of conciliatory gestures in response to unwanted advances. In the first line, the woman attempts to de-escalate; she signals that the man is coming too close to her by telling him to have a care for spilling her drink. Her rebuffs are light and witty, asking 'Wene ye that everybody lest to play'.[305] However, the man's responses are aggressive, saying that she may 'wette' [make jokes] after they have had sex.[306] As de-escalation has not succeeded, the woman attempts to shame him by labelling him a 'wanton', lacking in sexual control, and tells him that it will ruin them both.[307] She applies the language of transaction and sex work, saying she would not 'yette for furty pence' as a means to make clear that there are no circumstances under which she would consent.[308] As a last resort, she entreats him to do better, as he is hurting her and acting unkindly. In the end, she simply wishes she had shut the door to him.

In many ways, the pain and suffering of this song might lead us to conclude that there is nothing nourishing within it. Yet like the other lyrics it charts an important reality, that some men will not hear non-consent even when it is expressed in the clearest terms: 'Let go', 'Leff werke', 'ye shull not', 'Y wolde not', 'Nay', 'Y nelle', 'Ye herte my legge'.[309] In short, the song gives voice to, and supplies specific words for, what non-consent looks and sounds like. For women, this could

304 'Be pes ye make me spill my ale', l. 13.
305 Ibid, l. 5.
306 Ibid, l. 9.
307 Ibid, ll. 11, 14.
308 Ibid, l. 15.
309 Ibid, ll. 3-4, 11, 15, 17-19.

both operate as a script and a demonstration that assault can happen anywhere: the prohibitions not to be out of doors or among strangers is not protection.

The most important element is that the assailant is never portrayed in a good light, nor the woman blamed. There is no suggestion that the fictive speaker's presence in a tavern has inevitably resulted in her attack, which is a key component of older misogynistic readings of the genre. Although the song is a dialogue, hers is the first and last word, structurally placing the audience in her experience, men as much as women.

I can be wanton & yf I will follows a similar trajectory, of conciliation to shaming to survival. It appears in a collection most likely produced by someone with links to the court of Henry VIII c.1520-30.[310] In this text, the woman makes her non-consent clear in a manner that can only be quoted in full:

> I can be wanton & yf I wyl,
> but yf youe touche me I wyll crye howe.
> I can be merye & thinke no evell,
> but yet beware one cometh I trowe.
> Yf any come in faith I crye,
> that all the strete my voyce shall heare,
> take hede that no man doe youe espye,
> and I then warant youe come
> verye nye.
> But yf youe come syt farre from me,
> for me semeth youe should be wylde,
> and by suche wanton men as youe be,
> yonge maydes are sometymes begyled.
> I wilbe ware of suche lyke wylde men,
> for when they touche me I doe
> crye howe.
> kysse me ye should, I beshrewe me then,
> by crist not for my mothers blacke cowe,
> ye may me kyll as soone as kysse,
> I pray you awaie & let me be,
> in faith all the world wyll speake of this,
> I say ye play the foole with me,
> By god I strike youe with my fyste,

[310] The dating is based on one lyric in the collection which describes watching the King dance with his daughter while the Queen looks on. It ends with a hope that a son will soon follow.

I shall make your cap fall on the flower,
But for all that doe what youe Lyst,
& I wilbe styll & crye howe
no more.[311]

[I can be wanton and if I will,
But if you touch me I will cry how [i.e. raise the hue and cry].
I can be merry and think no evil,
But yet beware, one comes I know [someone I know might discover you].
If any come in faith I'll cry,
So that all the street my voice shall hear,
Take heed that no man does you espy,
And I then warrant you'll come
very near.
But if you come, sit far from me,
For it seems to me you are wild [sexually undisciplined/ dangerous],
And by such wanton men as you are,
Young maids are sometimes beguiled [deceived].
I will beware of such like wild men,
For when they touch me I do
cry how.
If you should kiss me, I will curse myself then,
By Christ! Not for my mother's black cow,
You may kill me as soon as kiss me,
I pray you go away and let me be,
In faith all the world will speak of this,
I say you play the fool with me,
By god I strike you with my fist,
I shall make your cap fall on the floor,
But for all that do what you like,
And I will be still and cry how
no more.]

This speaker differs from that of *Be pes ye make me spill my ale* in that she recognises the danger of sexual assault from the off, and responds by the only methods available to a woman who sought to demonstrate before a court that she had not consented. This is an explicit engagement with legal classifications for sexual violence in two stages.[312] First, she cries out, seeking rescue from any and all who hear. Second, she fights back, demonstrating physical resistance. This complicates

311 'I can be wanton & yf I wyl', ll. 1-27.
312 Hanawalt, *Of Good and Ill Repute*, 125-7; See also B. O'Connell, '"Struggling Wel and Myghtily": Resisting Rape in the Man of Law's Tale', *Medium Ævum* 84:1 (2015), 16-39, at 21-5.

our understanding of voicing, as the law established a framework within which fictive women worked, manipulating or being manipulated by what would be recognised as unlawful.

However, we should take the stages in this lyric at a slower pace, as there are important step-changes in the speaker's register for voicing non-consent. First, she threatens to cry out, and appeals to her attacker's sense of reputation by making clear that she will tell anyone who will listen what he has done. She makes clear that she will not be bought for any price – not even for her mother's prize cow.[313] She then beats him around the head, a last resort of meeting violence with violence. The text is so affecting because her resistance does not save her: no one hears her crying out. In the final lines she says she will stay still and silent. The phrasing 'doe what youe Lyst' may speak to acquiescence, but given the strength of expression throughout that it is not her will, this reads rather as a spitting rebuff designed to shame the assailant. The choice she is given – to be killed as soon as kissed – is no choice at all. Indeed, Harris sees this as a transition from resistance to survival.[314] This is a script for non-consent that ultimately recognises that clear vocal and physical rejection is by no means a sure safety mechanism, and invites critique of a society where this responsibility falls entirely on women.

The song is foregrounded with the speaker's call that she 'can be wanton' if she wants to, with all the associations of sexual recklessness, lack of control, and promiscuity – but also pleasure and choice. Like the speaker in *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day* who cannot possibly imagine beguilement, this woman confidently plays on the idea of naivety; she may be quick to laughter, loud, bawdy even, and yet will 'thinke no evell'. Would some listeners interpret this as a case of poetic justice? More sympathetically, it could also be read as a warning that women who publicly flirt will be viewed as sexually available and therefore unable to give or withhold consent, thus simultaneously demonstrating and critiquing the kinds of messaging we saw in Chapter One.

[313] There is perhaps humour here, but like in 'Be pes ye make me spill my ale', this appears to be in service of shaming the assailant rather than passing judgement on the speaker.
[314] Harris, 'Gender, Voice, and Desire in the Lyrics of Bodleian MS Ashmole 176', 42.

However, this is undercut by the way in which the speaker frames her ability to understand the situation and name it for what it is, as being a result of her sexual experience. Like the woman of *Be pes*, she throws back accusations of wantonness at her attacker, and sees him as 'wylde'. While some young women would be deceived by promiscuous men's advances, our speaker tells us that 'when' it happens to her she cries out. This in itself is an implicit critique, where men's unwanted sexual advances are inevitable. We are also given to understand that she has been in this position before, and knows what to do – perhaps only because of this. I lastly want to draw attention to the community of people in the periphery of *I can be wanton & yf I will*, who would protect the speaker from harm if they could, and believe her if she told them she had been assaulted. Whether real or imagined, she invokes them to resist assault. In Chapter Four, we will consider the extent to which this might reflect a social reality.

Both of the songs here present a picture of how sexual assault might look. Taken together, some important motifs emerge. Resistance could include shouting out or violence, but medieval lyric writers also recognised tacit resistance through attempting to pacify or otherwise put off an assailant with appeals to their sense of shame or reputation. In both poems, the point that the woman would not even have sex with him for something of value is presented as an important sign that there is no compromise in their non-consent. That these texts portray the assault itself is also perhaps structurally vital to the messaging; rape is portrayed starkly as undesirable for either partner, as much the man as the woman, and the present-tense expression of non-consent once the assault has begun utterly belies the picture we get from dominant discourse, where women apparently become sexually voracious once sex is initiated. There was a script for non-consent, and it was unflinching in its representation. Even more vitally, these lyrics present a series of methods to avoid, or survive, sexual violence. Deflect, refuse, threaten, scream, submit if there is no other choice – but survive.

CONCLUSION

If we begin with philology, a flexible and colourful Middle English lexicon for sex reveals itself. The language did not lack the words for women's bodies, pleasures, and subjectivity. Their genitals could variously be wares, mounds, and mouse traps. A range of verbs described non-penetrative sex acts intended for women's pleasure: 'fondlyng', 'rynge', 'clacke', 'gropith', and 'play' were all deployed in sexually charged contexts. Descriptions of penetrative sex perhaps hold fewer surprises, but were no less varied. Sex further had the potential to be fulfilling – it was merry, a comfort – and women could appreciate the attractiveness and sexuality of partners whom they chose. When 'Women's songs' describe sexual violence, they do not support the 'cautionary tale' approach adopted by earlier editors. The lyrics enunciate both the women's sexual agency and the danger posed by men, but don't make the latter an inevitable consequence of the former.

Lyrics could warn and teach, but also assert potential for interpreting illicit sex acts as something other than regrettable, and those women who engaged in them as something other than voracious whores who had relinquished their capacity for choice. These expressions are powerful, sometimes painful, but they tell us that medieval people imagined that women had the subjectivity, capacity, and language to consent, or not consent, or consent to one sexual partner and not another. There was danger in sexual negotiation, but also opportunities for meaningful and pleasurable sexual encounters. If we deny that these expressions are meaningful, we implicitly buy into a system of categorisation that sought, and seeks, to penalise women on the basis of their sexual status.

The manuscript context, production, audience, and reception of 'Women's songs' are complex, and we shall investigate them further in Chapter Three, but none of these considerations undermine the point that the women subjects in these texts are portrayed as negotiating their position within sexual encounters, with the expectation that they should derive pleasure from them. In some, their social standing or reputation does not suffer as a result of extra-marital sex, although this is dependent on secrecy. While the songs explored here do weave in potential

negative outcomes of sexual encounters, including abandonment, social rejection, pregnancy, and sexual assault, these dangers (and how to avoid or at least survive them) sit, at times uneasily, alongside expressions of independence, pleasure, and sexual celebration.

In considering how texts outside of the traditional literary canon could destabilise our understanding of women's sexuality, I have sought to demonstrate that these 'fringe' texts have much to offer beyond mere curiosity. Because they are so often anonymous, we cannot impose assumptions about the author, and we need to keep an unbounded interpretative horizon in view. This opens a space where in one text, women's sexuality can be explored in multiple ways, and we cannot privilege a reading that simply supports what we think we know. Texts talk about women's sexuality as an active, positive, and fulfilling part of women's relationships with both men and each other. I have shown that 'Women's songs' are indicative of multiple and varied voices running seemingly counter to the dominant discourses in medieval understanding of women's sexuality. They sing of sexuality in ways that are broad, in every sense.

CHAPTER THREE: 'WOMEN'S SONGS' IN CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses one of the main difficulties in interpreting 'Women's songs': their manuscripts are mostly associated with men. What does this mean for our understanding of their reception – which, as we have seen, helps to inform their very nature? In Chapter Two, we introduced some of the approaches historians and literary scholars have taken towards interpreting 'Women's songs'.[1] I return to these now to consider on what basis these scholars invoke particular communities as the site of the songs' creation, transmission, and reception. There is a common feature in these readings: that is, when men are invoked as readers, the texts are interpreted as misogynistic comedy, and when women are invoked, the texts are interpreted variously as laments, warnings, or sites of sex education. As one scholar opines:

> Some of the songs approach the subject with humour and look as if they were meant to amuse young men. One or two concentrate on the girls' despair at their predicament, and may have been intended to warn young women.[2]

Where there is space for a double meaning, this usually lands on the mischievous or empowering potential for women, and how they might simultaneously support misogynist readings for men. This is an important interpretative framework, but I think we can go further by looking at the actual manuscripts and such evidence as they provide about reception.

I have grouped the manuscripts by the status and/or occupation of their owners, and where this information is not available, by manuscript type. I consider the potential communities around these owners, and how they might have interacted with the texts. Just as the previous chapters have attempted to disrupt some of the monolithic views around women's sexuality, both those of contemporaries and those of scholars, here I suggest interventions for how we might

[1] See above, Chapter Two, 89-92.
[2] N. Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven, 2001), 331.

nuance our understanding of medieval men's sexuality on the basis of their age, status, and occupation. Central to this is the important work of scholars who question the presumed gulf between the norms and expectations that defined lay and clerical sexuality.[3]

The salience of male ownership raises a series of questions for us. Critics have often been inclined to associate male owners with misogynistic readings of the poems, however, some scholars have suggested a different approach. In *Ravishing Maidens*, Kathryn Gravdal exemplified a mode of literary interpretation where norms are not self-evident.[4] Rather, their continued existence relies on reproduction through cultural and social repetition. These insights have been applied to Middle English literature by Carissa Harris. *Obscene Pedagogies* filters texts through the lens of sexual education. The existence of songs where women consent to sex, she argues, demonstrates that texts about sexual assault cannot be taken as reflecting a wholesale societal acceptance of this violence as a norm.[5] Rather, texts that invoke either non-consent or consent are deliberate pedagogical practices that variously authorize or resist sexual aggression. These expressions are rarely so clear cut; societies of all kinds can often have simultaneously held but incompatible or barely compatible positions. As we have seen in Chapter Two, double meanings are part of this ambiguous education. The insights of Gravdal and Harris are really key in positioning texts within a spectrum of attitudes towards sexuality, where it is vital to take men seriously as subjects with as many complicated feelings about sex as women. We might further build on this line of argument to consider that just as the texts can contain multiple meanings, so too might our medieval textual community have had the capacity to hold a wide range of attitudes within themselves.

What happens when we afford our readers subjectivity that is not solely determined by their gender? At some junctures, these texts can be read as transforming men's desire into women's pleasure. This sense of desire is not always coterminous with the gendered speaker or textual voice,

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[3] J. D. Thibodeux, 'Living in Suspicion: Priests and Female Servants in Late Medieval England', *Journal of British Studies* 55 (2016), 658–679, at 678; P. Cullum, 'Clergy, Masculinity, and Transgression in Late Medieval England', in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. D. Hadley (Abingdon, 1998), 178-196, at 179-80.
[4] Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 81-5.
[5] Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 115-120.

and can operate on axes other than misogyny. This is not to reconfigure the meaning of our texts around men's experiences, but to reconstruct the social world in which women's pleasure was a central concept for thinking with and talking about sexuality. As we shall see, the songs spoke for and through all kinds of women, and all kinds of people: they were everyone's songs.

In this chapter, I follow Diane Watt in examining 'literary culture', starting at the manuscripts.[6] For Watt, this provides the basis for viewing the women of one gentry family, the Pastons, as participating in the consumption and transmission of texts, as well as their intertextual modes of expression. Women, she argues, did not just hear or read Lydgate and order copies of his works; literary references played a 'key role' in how they imagined and conveyed romantic attachment.[7] I shift the focus to consider what literary culture can tell us about subjectivity. By this, I do not mean accessing how medieval people who interacted with 'Women's songs' *felt*. We simply do not have enough to go on. We do, however, have some of their books. In some cases, we even have some books that they collated and copied themselves. In these, there are clues about how 'Women's songs' fit into their readers' parameters for sexual articulation and interpretation. Our aim, then, is to explore what manuscripts can indicate about the textured range of possible responses that these readers might have or bring to expressions of women's sexual subjectivity and pleasure.

We shall consider 'Women's songs' in their manuscript context, to understand the organising principles, circulation, and readership of this kind of lyric. The manuscripts of 'Women's songs' are disparate, each with its own idiosyncrasies. Generalisations are rarely helpful; in what follows, I seek rather to show the wealth of information we can glean by being attentive to each manuscript in its own right. We can posit the range of meanings that 'Women's songs' might have had for women who heard them, but given that the physical evidence we have also

[6] D. Watt, 'The Paston Women and Chaucer: Reading Women and Canon Formation in the Fifteenth Century', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 42:1 (2020) 337–350, at 339. For the relationship of this to Virginia Woolf's 'literary culture', see M. Mitchell, '"The Details of Life and the Pulsings of Affect": Virginia Woolf's Middle English Texts', *The Chaucer Review* 51:1 (2016), 107-129, at 110.
[7] Watt, 'The Paston Women', 348-9.

points to a wide range of men who read them, it seems important also to consider the range of meanings the songs may have held for these readers.

Where we are so often lacking in provenance for texts without author or attribution, manuscript setting helps us to extrapolate the intended function and tenor of lyrics for their composers. Grouping texts by form or subject matter under such banners as 'Women's songs' makes a set of attitudes visible; the next task is to place them back in the specificity of their context. As signalled in the introduction, I employ a very different methodology in this chapter. My strategy is to look closely at the manuscripts themselves: their production; their owners and readers; and codicological evidence. Late medieval English 'Women's songs' that deal with sexuality are found, we may recall, in some thirty manuscripts. It has long been clear that extant manuscripts are far more likely to have a traceable connection to men than women. This is not surprising in and of itself: men were far more likely to donate texts to institutions that could safeguard the codices' survival.[8] Further, men who were vowed celibates are better represented as writers than any other group. Our source base is no different: as named individuals, priests are in the majority, closely followed by lawyers and merchants. By far the largest group is the anonymous texts, and manuscripts autographed or owned by women are in the minority.

I begin with manuscripts owned by gentry households, with demonstrable participation of women in their production and usage, because in the historiography of 'Women's songs' these have elicited most attention in terms of thinking about the subjectivity of owners. This is at least partly because we have more detail about their lives. These readers appear more tangible; we can more confidently reconstruct them as individuals, and their preoccupations. The discussion of existing treatments of gentry literary culture and subjectivity serves to draw out the ways in which scholars have sought to demonstrate how lyric traditions could variously reflect on or help to

[8] M. Green, 'The Possibilities of Literacy and the Limits of Reading: Women and the Gendering of Medical Literacy', *Women's Healthcare in the Medieval West: Texts and Contexts* (Aldershot, 2000), 1-76, at 16.

structure interior worlds. From here, we treat the following manuscript groups, some defined by owner, some by type:

i. Students
ii. Monks, canons, priests, and secular clergy
iii. Song books
iv. Urban professionals: merchants and lawyers
v. Early printed music books

It will become apparent that there are links across these groupings, but this categorization leads us into different ways of thinking about composition, authors, copyists, performers, readers, and listeners. Cumulatively they build a comprehensive picture of the broad significance of 'Women's songs' in shaping and giving expression to pleasure.

THE LITERARY CULTURE OF WOMEN'S SONGS

Only a handful of manuscripts containing 'Women's songs' can be connected to gentry households, but from those we have, a few clear patterns emerge. The contents of these collections tend to be fairly generically coherent, with multiple texts from named authors, in particular Lydgate and Chaucer. The latter's presence is far more obviously felt than elsewhere, with songs not attributed to him nevertheless fitting into the pseudo-Chaucerian tradition. Perhaps by virtue of their Chaucerian proclivities, gentry manuscripts have attracted far more scholarly attention.

Take Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6, better known as the Findern Manuscript. It includes probably the most widely studied set of lyrics that are woman-voiced, demonstrably created by a social circle that included women. It is, however, an outlier in our 'Women's songs' manuscripts in that it contains a considerable body of verse in a self-consciously Chaucerian tradition.[9] The references to 'fynderne' connects the manuscript to Findern, South Derbyshire, supported by use of Derbyshire scribal dialect featured in the short lyrics, but the

[9] W. A. Davenport, *Chaucer, Complaint, and Narrative* (Cambridge, 1988), 8.

collection's provenance is still complicated and our understanding of it is far from complete.[10] The place of production is unknown – and the multiple booklets in a variety of forms and hands suggest that a single point of origin is unlikely. However, the signatures in the codex build a picture of a network of as many as thirty late fifteenth- to early sixteenth-century scribes engaged in a collaborative household production; twelve of them were women. Texts by Lydgate, Hoccleve, Gower, and Chaucer are infilled with shorter unique poems, of which there are thirty-four. An active writing community is further likely when we consider that several of the women-voiced lyrics include revisions, where different scribes rewrote each other's lines.[11]

The lyrics make sustained use of the first person, including in responses to Chaucerian love complaints recast from a feminine perspective.[12] McNamer argues that this 're-versing' of Chaucer is connected to the 'real experiences' of the Findern scribes/authors, where lyric traditions can be reformulated and rewritten to reflect lived experience.[13] The themes of absence and separation, she argues, would have resonated with gentry women whose husbands were indeed often away from the household. This reality may be borne out for the Findern women through verse, whether composing their own or reading each other's. That said, the claim to 'realness' – a convincing and authentic gender affect – on the basis of a set of emotional gestures ascribed with 'femininity' is problematic.[14] Indeed McNamer herself revises this equating of women's writing with experience, in favour of allegorical expression, in a later essay.[15] It is helpful, though, to think about the ways in which a highly formalised rhetorical genre – the love complaint – had the

[10] Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6, ff. 59v; 70; S. McNamer, 'Female Authors, Provincial Settings: The Re-Versing of Courtly Love in the Findern Manuscript', *Viator* 22 (1991), 279-310; K. Doyle, 'Thisbe Out of Context: Chaucer's Female Readers and the Findern Manuscript' *The Chaucer Review* 40:3 (2006), 231-261; A. Kinch, '"To thenke what was in hir wille": A Female Reading Context for the Findern Anthology', *Neophilologus* 91 (2007), 729-744.
[11] J. M. Martin, *The Findern Manuscript: a New Edition of the Unique Poems* (Liverpool, 2020), 40.
[12] See, for example, 'Some tyme y loued as ye may see', EEC, 301; DIMEV 4971.
[13] McNamer, 'Female Authors, Provincial Settings', 289.
[14] For 'realness', see M. Draz, 'Realness as Resistance: Queer Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Early Trans Critiques of Butler', *Hypatia* 37:2 (2022), 364-383, at 267. For another way of approaching the 'real', J. Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard, 2015), 105-7.
[15] S. McNamer, 'Lyrics and Romances', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, eds. C. Dinshaw and D. Wallace (Cambridge, 2003), 195-209.

potential to explore earnest emotions and provide structure for experiences regardless of gender.[16] Earlier lyric texts, including Chaucerian ones such as these, had the potential both to represent or expand the emotional life of writers and readers in relation to their lived experience. They further provided source material and forms for further imaginative writing, and this was true for men and women readers in the later medieval period.[17]

We can look to Diane Watt's examination of the letters of the Paston women, in particular the well-known couplet in the 1477 'valentine' from Margery Brews to her future husband John Paston III. Her love letters are witty and determined in effecting the outcome she desires – to be John's 'trewe lover and bedewoman'[18]:

> For þer wottys no creature what peyn þat I endure
> And for to be deede I dare it not dyscure.[19]
>
> [For no creature knows the pain that I suffer
> And even on pain of death I dare not reveal it.]

Alexandra Barratt has suggested that because there is no indication on the page that Margery was writing verse, she was perhaps 'quoting a familiar rhyming tag' rather than composing her own.[20] The success of the marriage negotiations, survival of the consistent voice of affection, and sexual interest in Margery's later letters enables us to see in her case what is far less available to us for other writers – that a scrap of verse could express emotion where prose failed.

It is instructive to notice how much more readily scholarship attributes an intersubjective relationship with texts in gentry families than for other types of readers. This is likely due to the gentry's comparably expansive textual survival: alongside their literary culture, their letters, legal records, and pastimes are more available to us, so we feel more confident inscribing the 'I' with

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16 McNamer, 'Female Authors', 200.
17 S. Lerer, *Courtly Letters in the Age of Henry VIII: Literary Culture and the Arts of Deceit* (Cambridge, 1997), 53, for the way in which Chaucerian writing and 'courtly' narrative, especially *Troilus and Criseyde* and the figure of Pandarus, interacted with how people presented themselves in the early Tudor court.
18 Watt, 'The Paston Women', 348-9; *Women's Writing in Middle English: an Annotated Anthology*, ed. A. Barratt (Abindon, 3rd edn., 2013), 275.
19 Quoted in Watt, 'The Paston Women', 348.
20 Barratt, *Women's Writing*, 272.

specificity. The less we know of the reader, the more scholars stabilize in a stereotypical reading where the most obvious structure – misogyny – dominates. Although the very issue is that there is not a lot of evidence, I argue that giving space and credit for less well-documented readers and voices to be flexible and nuanced improves our overall interpretations. Taking the scope for feeling, or emotional range, from better-documented communities, I then allow for that range to be present in others, even when the supporting evidence is limited. As we move into considering other social groupings around the manuscripts where we find 'Women's songs', we might hold fast to the potential for medieval readers beyond the gentry to inhabit the 'I' of the text, and not necessarily in a way that singularly or straightforwardly conforms to the dominant social code.

i. Students

How can we understand pleasure in texts predominantly operating in a male context - and can we move beyond simply assuming that all these texts sustained straightforwardly misogynist readings? For the Findern manuscript above, much has been made of the lack of pronouns in many of the lyrics, meaning that both men and women could be the 'I' of the text. Here, I want to suggest that lyrical pronouns are not necessarily the deciding feature in whether a reader can identify with the first person of 'Women's songs.' Whenever a text is voiced in the first person, the reader is invited to occupy the fictive emotional world. This is not purely postmodern linguistics. What we know of late medieval reading practices tells us that empathic place-holding, where one was encouraged to emotionally connect with experiences beyond one's gender, was an educational mode. Boys at school were taught to identify with the Virgin via first-person laments on the Passion.[21] Their literacy was at least partly structured around the ability to occupy a woman's emotional world.

[21] And before that, with Dido, for which see M. Curry Woods, *Weeping for Dido: the classics in the medieval classroom* (Princeton, 2019).

These lessons were carried to university by those boys who continued their education. Time spent in the university environment was viewed as beneficial in making connections, and as a route into administrative roles.[22] But it was also a time of misbehaviour, moral threat, and violence. A university education was something that was gained overwhelmingly in the company of other men, though not of course in isolation from the outside world.[23] Young men living away from home were frequently at odds with institutional efforts to limit their interaction with women, often unsuccessfully.

Insight into how young men may have interpreted consensual sex narratives can be gained by considering students' engagement with non-consensual sex narratives. Much work has been done on this topic with regards to the texts used to teach boys to read.[24] Marjorie Curry Woods was the first to consider the implications of scenes of sexual assault in Latin grammar books, which were read by boys in the schoolroom. Woods draws attention to the potential for abuse in educational contexts, recognising that representations of sexual violence in learning resources could contribute to the naturalising of explicitly non-consensual sex between men and women, but may also have encouraged self-identification among boys who were themselves at risk of sexual violence.[25] This work makes an important interpretative advance in understanding how a text might simultaneously ask the reader to position themselves as both the aggressor and victim of aggression.

Can something similar be said for consensual sex? Let us consider some lyrics that appear in educational contexts. The mid-fourteenth-century cleric's notebook Leicester, Leicestershire Record Office MS 6D32/2 contains a lyric on the inconstancy of students' affections:

Al clerkyn lou clercyn low

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[22] T. A. R. Evans, 'The Number, Origins and Careers of Scholars', in *The History of the University of Oxford, Volume II: Late Medieval Oxford*, eds. J. Catto and T. A. R. Evans (Oxford, 1992), 485-538, at 497.
[23] Karras, *Boys to Men*, 67-8.
[24] Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 201.
[25] H. Skoda, *Medieval Violence: Physical Brutality in Northern France, 1260-1330* (Oxford, 2013), 146-149; M. Curry Woods, 'Rape and the Pedagogical Rhetoric of Sexual Violence', *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1996), 56-86.

ys ywyrt at oxinfort on ȝe scolows dor
ȝef clerkyn lowe hawe y ne may
I may kys ȝe scoldor and far myn way
Alas clerkyn lowe fal from me
So doth ȝe lef on grof ys tre[26]

[All clerks' love, clerks' love
Is written at Oxford on the student's[27] door
If the clerk's love I may not have
I may kiss the school(room) door and be on my way
Alas clerk's love falls from me
As does the leaf that that grows on the tree]

Thomas Wright made the argument for the cleric scribe also being a schoolmaster, given the copies of lessons and grammar alongside lyrics.[28] This is the same manuscript that contains the brief lyric on an incestuous 'basse' we saw in Chapter Two, where domestic abuse of a boy ends in his damnation.[29] It is significant that this manuscript fits Woods' thesis that abusive texts were part of boys' education, but it also introduces a lyric with a liaison that is noncommittal, but otherwise unproblematic.

Wright further suggests that the scribe may be identified with an autograph for the metrical Latin *pater noster* later in the manuscript, which concludes 'Sede Roger Wewlock'.[30] If this scribe went to Oxford, his time there was not spent honing his grammar – we have already seen that his Latin was more than usually poor. The lyric above comments on (or recalls?) the casual relationships of students. The 'I' here clearly laments the loss of affection, but also expresses something of an awareness that relationships might be fleeting or transactional as well as rooted in romantic attachment. The speaker may be of any gender, as no identifiers are given. The speaker

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[26] Beneath, the Latin translation runs as follows: '*Omnis amor clerici, amor clerici/ Scribitur Oxoniae ad hostium studii/ Si amorem clerici habere nequiam/ Osculabor hostium et scito fugiam/ Omne quod amavi sescidit a me/ Sicud flores virides discendunt ab arbore*'; Leicester, Leicestershire Record Office MS 6D32/2, p. 38; The largest section of the MS is xiv (med), other shorter sections bound together are both earlier and contemporary. See N. R. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries* (5 vols., Oxford, 1983), iii, 77-9.
[27] MED scolere n. 1(a) a student
[28] T. Wright, 'On an Early Manuscript in the Muniment Room in the Guildhall, Leicester', *Collectanea Archaeologica* (London, 1862), 55-64.
[29] See above, 106-7; the advice is to lie in her bed and leave her to drown in a bottomless boat. Leicester, Leicestershire Record Office MS 6D32/2, p. 37b.
[30] Wright, 'On an Early Manuscript', 55.

recognises that 'y ne may' be loved, given that 'Al' clerks are the same in promising more than they intend. In contrast to expectations that the speaker might be beguiled or betrayed, the lyric reveals a more worldly and nuanced view. The likely outcome was known from stereotypes of clerks, as inevitable as leaves falling. Yet, the speaker both chooses to form an attachment anyway, and then expresses sadness at its end. A student could have taken a range of messages from such a lyric. Certainly, a misogynistic reading where the speaker is foolhardy is one available option. But the lyric also potentially taught the expectation that students would form noncommittal relationships, and that these could have an emotional impact as significant as any social or moral dimension.

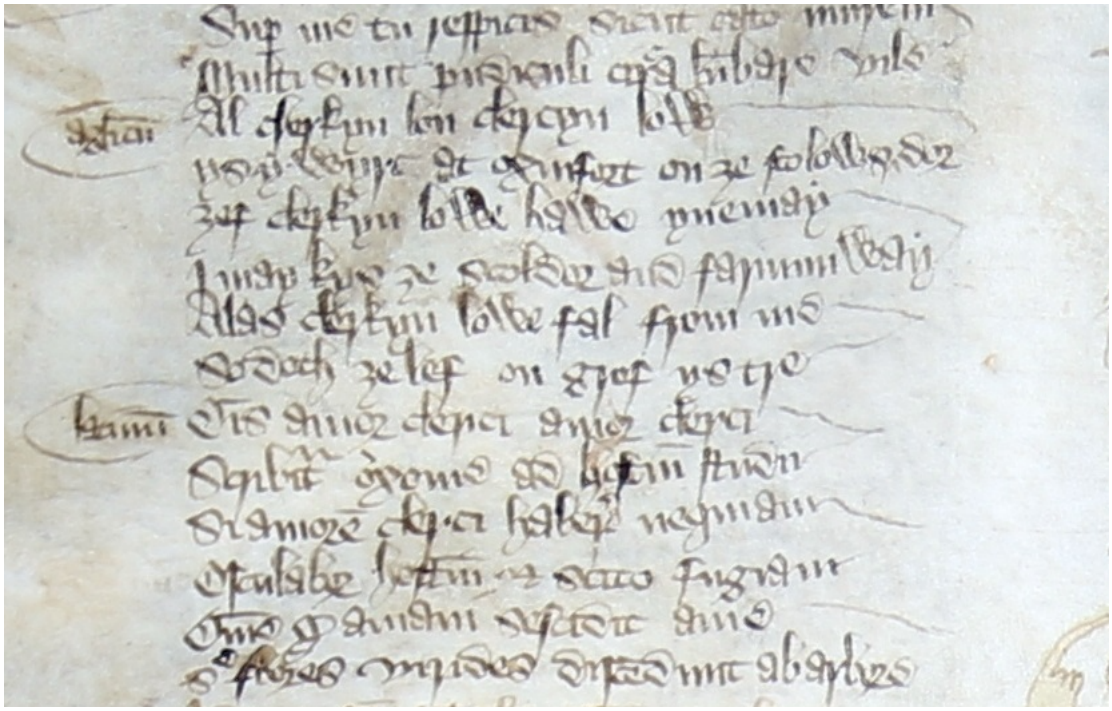

Figure 2: Leicester, Leicestershire Record Office 6D32, p. 38

Once at university, this alternative education continued. Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 383 appears to be a workbook, with a student as the most likely scribe.[31] The signature of one Wymundus London features, and was identified by Greene as a student of Magdalen College, Oxford.[32] First a chorister, then a demy from 1485, Wymundus would have been a poor

[31] Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 383.
[32] EEC, 324-5.

undergraduate scholar required by the College to be instructed in plainchant.[33] The content of the workbook supports Greene's suggestion, as this is clearly a student learning about notation – he attempts to copy and compose, with varying degrees of success. As in the manuscript of the schoolmaster above, violence between men of another kind is present in the workbook. A brief note encourages: 'Bete hy[m] at bete the' [beat him that beat you].[34]

The manuscript also contains lessons, memoranda, and accounts, as well as eleven lyrics, of which five are 'Women's songs'. Two of these were read closely in Chapter Two: *Al þis day ic han souȝt*, and *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day*.[35] Both end in pregnancy, and they appear together on one page. Sarah McLoughlin argues for viewing these texts within a homosocial context.[36] She suggests a kind of surrogacy, where the sexually active male figure within the text, whose advances are enthusiastically received, provided a script for playing out virility and rebellion against the university. She also points out that some of the lyrics in Gonville and Caius MS 383 have the title of a different lyric written alongside the text, perhaps indicating a more familiar tune to which it can be sung.[37] In a majority male environment, the woman's voice may well have been performed by a man, and this performer could make choices about expression. Judith Bennett similarly argues that same-sex performances may have rendered the forsaken maiden ridiculous, but equally redemption could be found in a sympathetic rendition.[38] Further, McLoughlin considers the potential for 'homoerotic overtones' even while the lyrics celebrate heterosexual sex.[39]

Given that we have established readings of *Al þis day ic han souȝt*, and *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day* where consent is important, we might consider how a student reader could position

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[33] C. M. Cervone, 'Wondering Through Middle English Lyric', *What Kind of Thing is a Middle English Lyric?*, eds. C. M. Cercone and N. Watson (Philadelphia, 2022), 61-87, at 80.
[34] Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 383, P. 149v.
[35] Chapter Two, 129; Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College MS 383, p. 41. The others are 'Sume men sayonne þat i am blac', p. 190, and 'Y louede a child of þis cuntre', p. 210.
[36] McLoughlin, 'Gender and Transgression', 71.
[37] 'Alone i lyue alone' is a fragment heading for 'Wan ic wente byȝonde þe see', p. 41; 'Bryd on brere/ y telle yt to non oþur/ y ne dare' is a fragment heading for 'Y louede a child of þis cuntre', p. 210; McLoughlin, 'Gender and Transgression', 72.
[38] Bennett, 'Ventriloquisms', 190.
[39] McLoughlin, 'Gender and Transgression', 72-3.

himself within these texts, almost certainly with awareness of texts that portray non-consent from their schooling. McLoughlin's argument about surrogacy could be taken in an alternative direction to virility and rebellion. Themes of vulnerability, and sexual inexperience and experimentation are arguably as prominent in the lyrics. There are parallels between the situations of singlewomen and clerics in minor orders: both were in a position of heightened sexual surveillance, the former because of their repute, and the latter because of the expectation for sexual purity even before they have taken their vows. Both were in what may reasonably be described as a liminal life stage in terms of social expectations of their life-cycle.[40] Lower order clerics were pre-ordination, and could yet choose a lay life. Likewise, singlewomen could yet choose to be married. For both, extramarital sex was both an expectation and an accusation. Yet the consequences for encounters in both of these texts land solely on the woman speaker. Neither the fictive singlewoman nor the clerk map neatly onto the student that copied their lyrical encounter, but there are resonances across these identities.

Pedagogical practices encouraged identification with first person lyric, and this could be used to both reproduce abuse and interrupt it. I have contributed here to the scholarly discussions of formal and informal sexual education in schools and universities by exploring how identification with women and their sexual experiences that were simultaneously pleasurable and problematic also formed a part of the formation of young men and boys' development. Some students would have gone on to marry; others progressed into orders. It is to the latter men that we now turn.

ii. Monks, Canons, Priests, and Secular Clergy

The first group of 'Women's songs' extant in clerical contexts are those found in a variety of treatise, sermon, and pastoral contexts. Scholars see this kind of material as having 'exemplary potential'; and indeed, lyrics often appear in sermons where they serve as an illustrative proof-text

[40] Mazo Karras, *Boys to Men*, 70-71.

in lessons about the repercussions of sex outside marriage for men and women.[41] In one thirteenth-century collection of exempla, a tale about purity [*castitas*] tells of the regret that follows singing and dancing:

> *Sic juvencule, dum sunt virgines et caste, cantant; sed cum venter ceperit inflari, cantum mutant in lamentum*:
>
> Weylawey, þat iche ne span
>
> Whan y to þe ringe ran[42]
>
> [Thus young women, while they are virgins and chaste, sing; but when their belly begins to swell, they change their song to a lament:
>
> Wellaway, that I did not spin
>
> When I ran into the ring]

Phillips calls the singlewomen of such lyrics 'yokel maidens', the stuff of privileged fantasy.[43] She presents the example of Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff.5.48, in which we find *The last tyme the well-ey woke*, and which appears to have belonged to a parish priest. For Phillips, it was likely 'used within the parish by the priest to teach local girls of the dangers of songs and dances, alongside other works which combined entertaining and edifying functions'.[44] This was indeed an important strand in the use of 'Women's songs' in clerical contexts, but this particular text is exceptionally explicit and violent. A woman's assault and pregnancy, resulting in her need to rely on her assailant for food and money for the child, goes somewhat beyond what might reasonably be called a project of education, given that it may have equally inspired fear in young women if they heard it from their priest. At best, it is a warning to the priests themselves about the financial consequences of impregnating a parishioner against their will. And yet, the violent

[41] Cartlidge, 'Alas, I go with chylde', 45. See also K. Boklund-Lagopoulou, 'Popular Song and the Middle English Lyric', in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. K. Reichl (Berlin, 2011), 555-80.
[42] London, British Library MS Additional 33956; *EEC* 490; S. Wenzel, 'Unrecorded Middle-English Verses', *Anglia* 92 (1974), 55-78, at 75; DIMEV 6215.
[43] Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 95.
[44] Ibid, 96.

content of *The last tyme the well-ey woke* places it in the minority in the corpus of 'erotic' texts that appear in manuscripts associated with clerics. Once we move away from assuming that priests necessarily conflated young sexually active women with naivety, simplicity, or indeed vulnerability, their evocation in religious contexts becomes far, far more interesting.

Dublin, Trinity College MS 347 is a miscellany compiled in Ireland in the late thirteenth century. Sermons make up the bulk of the material, but the longest continuous text is a religious tract, Gilbertus Minorita's *Distinctiones*.[45] Little is known of the author, but he makes extensive use of classical and patristic authorities, as well as an attack on dance and dress.[46] In a passage against marriage, four mono-rhyming lines provide the *thema*, the text which forms the basis of the sermon:

> If my husband gius noht
> Another hauet my luue ybohit
> for tuo gloues wyht ynoht
> if hic him luue y naue no woht.[47]
>
> [If my husband cares not
> Another has bought my love
> For two very white gloves
> If I love him, I have no[48] harm]

The perspective we might take from the song is that a naive married woman is easily bought with a pair of gloves without thinking any harm in it, but Gilbertus complicates the picture a little. He specifically takes issue with how the rule of marriage is undermined when '*cantatur quod pro prauo viro uxor dimittere non debeat quin amicum faciat*' [it is sung that a wife should not renounce but take a lover in place of a wicked husband].[49] For Gilbertus, women are spurred [*incitantur*] through the act of singing such a song; but equally he mirrors the perspective of the speaker. He reads the

[45] Dublin, Trinity College MS 347, fols. 157-331v; M. L. Colker, *Trinity College Library Dublin: Descriptive Catalogue of the Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin Manuscripts*, 2 vols. (Aldershot, 1991), i, 710-740.
[46] Ibid, fols. 199v-200; 280-284.
[47] Ibid, fol. 199v.
[48] Naue, or 'not have', intensifier.
[49] Dublin, Trinity College MS 347, fol. 199v.

husband's lack of regard as its own kind of wickedness, where withholding affection might, too, cause a woman to seek out a lover. He turns to another song as the prooftext [*Vnde*]:

> lete þe cukewald syte at hom
> And chese þe another lefmon
> lete þe chorl site at hom and pile
> and þu salt don wat þu wile
> God hit wot hit nys no skile
>
> [Let the cuckold sit at home
> And choose for yourself another lover
> Let the churl sit at home and withhold[50]
> And you shall do what you will
> God knows it is not unreasonable.[51]

There is no further glossing. These vernacular songs [note *cantatur*] frame, rather than are framed by, Gilbertus' moral exposition: the apparent lesson is sandwiched by lyrics that portray the husband as at fault. The husband is ungenerous and grasping, a churlish cuckold who withholds from his wife – it is not clear whether this means in terms of money or sex, or both – and this justifies the wife doing as she will.[52] Indeed, in the voice of the speaker, this causes no harm – an expression the listener can take as naive, and/or playfully knowing.[53] The result is a far more balanced (and comic) conclusion on marriage: it is not simply that men should not marry because women are unfaithful, but because both men and women make poor spouses.

A similar theme is suggested in Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Hh.6.11 where, among other verses given in Latin and Middle English, a late-thirteenth-century hand from the Benedictine Ramsey Abbey copies a lament in Latin and English probably against a husband from whose touch the woman recoils. This is *I am Rose wo is me*, in which a woman laments that

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[50] MED pilen v 1.(c) to deprive, or 3.(a) to heap up; Boklund-Lagopoulou, 'Popular Song and the Middle English Lyric', at 565, translates as 'scratch himself'.
[51] MED unskil 1.(a) unreasonableness.
[52] For discussion of the expectation of a sexual relationship within marriage, see D'Avray, *Medieval Marriage*, on conjugal debt.
[53] J. Scattergood connects the sentiments of financial accumulation and meanness here to the Shipman's Tale, for which see his 'Trinity College Dublin MS 347 and a Possible Source for Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*, VII 11-19', *The Chaucer Review* 55:2 (2020), 236-46.

she 'wacs' or swells with pregnancy.[54] In her discussion of this lyric, Alexandra Barratt argues that this text and others like it 'implicitly invite scorn and condemnation' towards women's 'humiliation' following illicit pregnancy.[55] But if we are to understand Rose's fate as having to marry an undesirable partner following extramarital pregnancy, her 'punishment' is to end up with a lecher – whose nose she has to wipe – for a husband.[56] The man here does not necessarily invite any less scorn and condemnation.

Clerical writers could make witty use of vernacular texts about sex voiced by women in ways that do not undermine the voice they are invoking. In some instances, lyric fragments form the *thema*. This was common practice by the thirteenth century, most famously in the *Fioretti* of St Francis.[57] A composite manuscript of the Cistercian abbey of St Mary the Virgin, Fountains Abbey, North Yorkshire, contains a fully macaronic fourteenth-century sermon on the Ascension, which switches seamlessly between Latin and Middle English throughout:

> *Karissimi, bene scitis quod iste mulieres cum posuerunt filios in cunabulis*, þay lulle þe child wyth þair fote and singges an hauld sang, *sic dicens*: Wake wel, Annot, þi mayden boure, and get þe fra Walterot, for he es lichure.[58]
>
> [*Dearest friends, you know well that these women, when they have put their children in the cradle*, they lull the child with their foot and sing an old song, saying thus: Guard well, Annot, your maiden bower, and keep away from Walter, for he is a lecher.]

While clearly not a lullaby, the preacher imagines a performance context of lulling for this song. Kathleen Palti has described the lyric as having an 'ungendered, rather moralistic speaker'; yet the

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[54] Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Hh.6.11, fol. 67r. For more on this manuscript, see A. Barratt, "'I am Rose" Restored', *Notes and Queries* 37:235 (1990), 270. Barratt compares this lyric to a Latin couplet from another, later, manuscript, to reconstruct the damaged and incomplete Latin couplet in Hh.VI.11. Based on the later Latin, this gives 'A churl's hand constantly torments me'. This is a translation of the Latin reconstruction 'manus angit rustica me' [a peasant's hand distresses me]. Barratt, *Women's Writing*, 16. However there is also a more contemporaneous and comparable lyric in Amiens, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 0460, fol. 98, for which see *Catalogue général des manuscrits des bibliothèques publiques de France: Départements*, ed. U. Roberts (Paris, 1893), 221. Thank you to Nick Perkins for identifying this lyric.

[55] Barratt, *Women's Writing*, 16.

[56] 'sutere þat i snete þe', [Cobbler whose nose I blow] *I am Rose wo is me*, in ibid; MED sniting(e ger. 1a) evacuation of mucus.

[57] See H. G. Pfander, 'The Popular Sermon of the Medieval Friar in England' (PhD Thesis, New York University, 1937), 81, n. 14, and *Vie de St. François d'Assise*, ed. P. Sabatier (London, 1894), 195.

[58] London, British Library MS Cotton Faustina A V, fols. 10r-v; A. J. Fletcher, *Preaching, Politics, and Poetry in Late-Medieval England* (1998), pp. 32-3; Fletcher's translation.

warning here is against a specific named man flagged for avoidance.[59] The preacher, however, expands the lyric into a narrative which is in turn treated as an allegory for the soul's dalliances. The girl Annot had many lovers, but four in particular [*multios amasios, sed specialiter quattuor*]:

> *Ista Agnes quadam vice sicud iuit* til þe ryng at scheue hir burel, *contigit quod obuiauit omnes hos quattuor amasios venientes contra eam in via. Cogitauit qualiter potuit placere omnibus et venit et salutauit eos, et istum magnum regem* Walterum *cepit per manum. Eius vicinum* Thomam þe Tom *posuit pedem eius super pedem suum. Super diuitem de eadem patria* Gilbertum Gilman *fixit oculum, et* wynked *super eum. Et cum forti atleta* Alleluia *loquebatur, ita quod placuit per eius contenaunce omnibus preter unum, scilicet,* Alleluia*, qui voluit habuisse eam solus.*[60]
>
> [*Once upon a time as this Annot went* to the ring-dance to show off her clothes of baize*, it happened that all these four lovers met up with her on the way. She thought how she could please all of them and came and greeted them, and took this great king* Walterot *by the hand. She set her foot on the foot of his neighbour,* Thomas the Idle. *She set her eye upon the rich man from the same native land as hers, Gilbert Gilman, and* winked *at him. And she spoke with the mighty champion* Alleluia, *so that through her bearing she pleased them all except one, that is, Alleluia, who wanted to have her for himself alone.*]

The preacher goes on to explain that Annot stands for the Christian soul, beautiful but facing temptations on all sides. Walterot is the devil, Thomas the flesh, and Gilbert the world. The jealous lover, Alleluia, who must have Annot completely, is God. The gestures that Annot affects to please her lovers map exactly onto those we have already seen in other 'Women's songs' and sermons; she touches hands, steps on toes, makes eye contact, winks, and speaks. Although Annot here is shown to be flirtatious and wayward, the sermon also took this young desiring woman as a model for the (ungendered) soul, who might get things right eventually by committing to the right lover.

Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Ii.3.8 is a collection in several hands from around 1400, including four treatises on the Ten Commandments, fifty-six sermons, then further sermon notes and exempla.[61] The majority of the material is in Latin, but important statements, stories, proverbs, and poems are given in Middle English. One scribe, who writes the section ff.

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[59] K. Palti, 'Singing Women: Lullabies and Carols in Medieval England', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110:3 (2011), 359-382, at 363.
[60] Fletcher, *Preaching, Politics,* 32-3.
[61] Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ii.3.8. For a full MS description see M. James, *Unpublished description by M.R. James of Cambridge, University Library, MS Ii.3.8 (Four treatises on the Ten Commandments; Ars praedicandi; sermons in Middle English)* (2021), https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.67974, accessed 23/05/2021.

60v-101, includes two short lyrics about women, which within twenty folios show the interpretative range that vernacular texts could provide.[62] The first, *By twene a þousend men may on y koupe reyme*, is embedded in a sermon by the Franciscan friar Lawrence Bretoun (fl. 1330).[63] By way of example of women's lack of discretion, Bretoun quotes two cross-rhymed quatrains which end, 'þerof wonder none þow take/ of cunde it komes hem to byswyke' [do not be surprised about that/ it is in their nature to deceive].[64]

The second lyric is in a sermon on Ezechiel 6:11, which prophesies the suffering and oblivion of idolaters. It is woman-voiced, and used as an allegory for the ease with which humans forsake God:

> …*de suo amasio dixit quondam quedam puella ad iacturam lapidum*:
>
> Ate ston casting my lemman iches
> and atte wrastling sone I hym les
> allas þat he so sone fel
> wy nadde he stonde better vile geres[65]
>
> *Moraliter: Ista puella, que amasium suum elegit in proieccione lapidis, est dei misericordia, que anno preterito in Quadragesima quemlibet peccatorem adoptavit in suum amasium… Set propterea in lucta contra diabolum cito ipsum prodidit et sprevit, ubi ab ipso verecunde prostratus fuit*:
>
> allas þat he so sone fel
> wy nadde he stonde better vile gorel
>
> […once a young woman spoke about her lover at stone casting:
>
> At stone-casting my lover I chose
> And at wrestling soon I lost him
> Alas that he so soon fell

[62] Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ii.3.8, ff. 60v-101; A third woman's song appears in a warning sermon about keeping the Ten Commandments at fol. 9v. A short couplet, 'Synne is on my breste/ Þat non so bitter loue is as of prest', is expanded upon as a tale of a nun who accepts a gold necklace from a priest as a love token. The following Sunday, her chest begins to putrefy in the place where the necklace hangs.

[63] [Among a thousand men and many more I could you count]; Cambridge University Library MS Ii.3.8, fol. 68v. Another copy of Bretoun's sermon is found in Oxford, Merton College MS 248, fols. 131-132v, for which see Pfander, 'The Popular Sermon of the Medieval Friar in England', 50-51.

[64] Cambridge University Library MS Ii.3.8, fol. 68v. This short lyric is erroneously listed as a women's song in DIMEV 841, perhaps because the first line addresses a man as one among many. The speaker is not gendered, but given they can count thousands of men they would trust and not a single woman, we might take the perspective to be masculine.

[65] Cambridge University Library MS Ii.3.8, fol. 86; DIMEV 728; Robbins, *Secular* Lyrics, xxxix. The scribe writes 'geres', but as the second couplet is repeated later in the sermon with 'gorel', we should also read it here.

Why did he not stand better, worthless [lit. vile] pig[66]

Morally: That girl who chose her lover at stone casting is like the mercy of God which last year at Lent chose a sinner as her beloved…But, subsequently, in a wrestling match with the devil himself, he [the lover] betrayed and spurned [God's mercy], where he [the lover] was shamefully laid low:

Alas that he so soon fell
Why did he not stand better, worthless pig]

In ventriloquising this lyric, the preacher places himself and his listeners in sympathy with the woman/God, whose lover/sinner falls so soon in the wrestle. The preacher envisions the vicissitudes of the relationship in the frame of the celebrations of Lent, when Jesus wrestled with the Devil in the wilderness. This captures both the opportunity that holy days presented to lovers, as we have seen, but also the time at which people were perhaps most likely to be shriven – and yet within the year they fall, again and again. The sermon wears its lesson lightly, even allowing the double entendre of standing and falling to play into our view of the lover. His impotence in sexual performance/avoidance of sin places the audience with the woman who is frustrated by her choice of partner.[67]

We have already seen the first couplet of this lyric in Chapter One.[68] That version is in a thirteenth-century Dominican manuscript, Cambridge Trinity College B.1.45 (43), and like Cambridge University Library MS Ii.3.8 uses the lyric as the *thema* for a sermon, although in reversed order:

Atte wrastlinge mi lemman iches
and atte ston kasting i him for les[69]

[At wrestling, my lover I chose
and at stone-casting I dumped him]

[66] From Old French, *gorel*.
[67] See Harris, *Obscene Pedgaogies*, 170 for the suggestion that 'ston' and 'wrastling' are also euphemistic.
[68] See above, Chapter One, 47.
[69] 'Atte wrastlinge mi lemman iches', Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.1.45 (43), fol. 41v; DIMEV 728; Robbins, *Secular* Lyrics, xxxix.

This version is introduced as the idle words of 'wilde wimmen & gol men' [wild women and lusty men] of the town. But this does not *only* signal 'disapproval'.[70] In a good-humoured turning of the tables, this preacher makes the reason for making this his *thema* explicit:

> …to snibben sinne & vndermine folie. & hem þat ben out of godis lore strengþin us to bringen hem agein and idele wordes tornen to note of saule, for litlike nis no folie ifundin þat sum wisdom nis bundin inne…[71]
>
> […to rebuke sin and undermine folly. And they that are out of God's law, strengthen us to bring them [back] again, and turn idle words to the benefit of the soul, for surely there is no folly to be found that some wisdom is not bound in [it]…]

The preacher interprets the lyrics tropologically, where humanity chooses Christ 'atte wrastlynge' as their 'lemman'. Wrestling further becomes an allegory for humanity's fight against its three foes: the Devil, their own sinful Flesh, and the World.[72] He then asks what the stones might be in 'ure sauue' [our song], revealing that the wild lovers who sing the song about the town are the very same men and women of his congregation. He responds: the stones are the hard hearts of men and women who do not listen to Christian teaching. The final flourish: Christ gave us his 'suet & loueliche herte' [sweet and lovely heart] – and we, hard-hearted sinners, dump him.

Precisely this message is conveyed in the proof-text of another sermon in a collection compiled for John de Sheppey, Bishop of Rochester 1352-60:

> *Et ultimo debet esse amor perseverans. 'Esto', inquid, 'fidelis usque ad mortem et dabo tibi coronam vite' quia non placet sibi quod diligas eum modico tempore in anno et deseras eum toto anni residuo, sicud faciunt pacem cum eo in quadragesima et promittunt sibi fidelem amorem set adveniente estate et tempore ameno ipsum dimittunt.* Janekyn of Londone, Is loue is al myn, etc.[73]
>
> [*And lastly our love must be persevering. 'Be faithful', he says, 'until death, and I will give you the crown of life'* [Rev. 2.10], *for it does not please him that you love him for a short while in the year and then abandon him for the remainder of the year, as many do who make peace with him in Lent and promise*

[70] See Boklund-Lagopoulou, 'Popular Song and the Middle English Lyric', 558.
[71] Trinity College MS B.1.45 (43), fol. 41v; A similar line of reasoning is used by Richard de Ledred, Bishop of Ossory, in the *Red Book of Ossory*, for which see Chapter Two.
[72] Described here as the Abrahamic covenant: 'tre þecuvenant to werld'.
[73] Oxford, Merton College MS 248, fol. 148v; S. Wenzel, *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric* (Princeton, 2014), 224-5. See also R. M. Thompson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Medieval Manuscripts of Merton College, Oxford* (Oxford, 2009), 187-192.

him faithful love, but when summer comes and the mild season, they abandon him. Janekyn of London, his love is all mine, etc.]

This lyric fragment does not self-evidently connect to what has immediately preceded it. To function as a proof-text, it would require knowledge of the longer text on the part of the speaker or listener or both to fill in the blanks. Preachers had the capacity to joke with and engage their audience, tying lessons to tangible examples that meant something to them. While this could be at the expense of women, we have seen here that for some preachers, the relationship dynamics of 'Women's songs' could provide entertaining and familiar contexts through which to describe their parishioners' relationship to Christ. My argument here resonates with David d'Avray's perspective that preachers talked about marriage texts partly in order to exhort certain marital relationships, but also analogically.[74] Lyric texts were very malleable. In particular, they could be read at many levels, and the gendered speaker/perspective that might be their most obvious meaning could easily be appropriated or diverted or re-voiced in a number of circumstances and for different listeners.

Some clerics further copied songs into working collections or notebooks for parochial and convivial use.[75] The celebration of the physical attractiveness of male servants from the perspective of a singlewoman, *Off servying men I wyll begyne*, is found in London, British Library, Sloane MS 1584.[76] This pastoral handbook or miscellany, containing treatises on confession, miraculous tales, and Rules of the Order for Premonstratensians, as well as recipes and lyrics, was written by John Gysborn, canon of Coverham.[77] John is likely to have come from Guisborough in the North Riding, and belonged to the Premonstratensian house at Coverham, in the parish of Middleham.[78]

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[74] d'Avray, *Medieval Marriage*, 68-72.

[75] *As I stood on a day me self under a tree* is written at the end of an early fourteenth century copy of *Gui de Warewic*, perhaps by one 'Joh'ns de Haukeham Rector eccl'ie de Flet' who signed the end flyeaf book. London, College of Arms MS Arundel 27, fol. 130v.

[76] Some historians date the MS to the late fifteenth century, as early as 1480. See C. M. Meale, *Writings on Love in the Middle Ages* (New York, 2006), 170.

[77] '*Scriptum per me Johannes Gysborn canonicus de Coverham*', London, British Library MS Sloane 1584, fol. 12.

[78] Canons often took the name of their place of birth; A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London, 1989), 27.

Canons of the abbey served a number of chapels and appropriated parish churches such as Kettlewell; in the late fifteenth century, of the nineteen canons in the house, seven acted as parish priests in the local area while maintaining their status as a canon regular.[79] While the diocesan record for Coverham is patchy and does not list a John Gysborn, one John Gisburgh, canon of Coverham, was named as the vicar for the church at Kettlewell in 1521.[80] It is unsurprising, then, for this canon regular to be in possession of vernacular pastoral material. Later in his book, he describes himself as 'Curatus De alyngton lincolniensis Diocesis'. Here, too, he leaves no trace in the diocesan record, but it seems plausible that he was on secondment to Newbo, the Premonstratensian house to which the Allington benefice was attached. Julia Boffey makes a further connection to a John Gysborne at the Cistercian house of Calder, charged with sodomy *per voluntariam pollucionem* [through voluntary pollution] in 1535 during the monastery visitations of that year.[81] If we accept that this is the same man, it might cause us to read the lyric again with new eyes.

A final manuscript contains *At the northe ende of selver white*. Frustratingly we cannot certainly tie the lyric to a clerical author, but its addition to an existing manuscript for which we can evidence a clerical provenance is nonetheless demonstrative of how lyrics might find their way into written contexts, and interact with other texts they are transmitted with. Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Additional 5943 is a composite manuscript of irregular structure, and therefore unlikely to have been originally intended for compilation. The original book was most likely produced at

[79] Moiety of the church of Kettlewell c. 1187, confirmed in 1221, see *Fasti Parochiales Vol. IV: Being notes on the advowsons and pre-Reformation incumbents of the parishes in the Deanery of Craven*, eds. K. M. Gurney and C. Clay, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series 133 (Leeds, 1971), 71-2; W. M. l'Anson, 'Coverham Abbey', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 25 (1923), 273-301, at 282.

[80] However, this John Gisburgh only remains in post for three months, compared to the decade or more of his predecessors, apparently replaced on death. In any case, there are documents in his book dateable up to 1531, so either this is not our Gisborn, or the record is erroneous. *Fasti Parochiales Vol. IV*, 77; Reg. Wolsey, fol. 54v; 58v.

[81] i.e. masturbation; see J. Boffey, *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1985), 129, n. 19; *Letters and Papers, foreign and domestic, of Henry VIII: preserved in the Public Record Office, the British Museum, and elsewhere in England, Volume 10, January-June 1536*, ed. J. Gairdner (London, 1887), 140.

or for Winchester College.[82] The gathering comprising folios 161-72 is pocket-sized, ruled with staves on every page, and contains notated songs in Latin, French, and English, although some song texts are simply copied over the staves without notation. The linguistic and notation features date this gathering to 1397-1401.[83] One song is ascribed to 'Edmundus', linked by Frank Harrison to Edward, a clerk of the College Chapel, who was *informator choristarum* [instructor of the choristers] in 1396-7, soon after the College's foundation.[84] Most of this section is the work of one scribe, who, as Richard Rastall has convincingly argued, can be identified as Thomas Turke, a fellow of Winchester College 1395-8, and again 1400-1.[85] David Fallows has further connected the content of some of the songs included in this booklet to the statutes created by the College's founder William of Wykeham.[86] In particular, there is an injunction to leave the hall immediately after meals in order to avoid 'idle gossip', except on feast days, when fellows and scholars were permitted to remain and entertain themselves 'with songs and other honest pastimes'.[87] Indeed, one song seems particularly fitting: *Si quis amat* warns against criticising those who are not present at table during a meal.[88]

After leaving Winchester College, Turke took his books and moved to Wiltshire, then Dorset to serve as a vicar for almost two decades, before gifting all his worldly goods to become a monk of the Carthusian Priory of Hinton, Somerset in c.1418. He gave this particular manuscript to John Morton, an official of the diocesan administration of Salisbury. However, the three erotic lyrics, *May no man slepe in zour halle*, *At the northe ende of seluer whyte*, and *The man that I loued al ther best*, are in a different, and probably later, hand. Two lyrics are placed together on fols. 170v-1r,

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[82] Several inscriptions associate the MS with the college, for which see Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Additional 5943, fols. 173; 184r-v.
[83] On the potential for void notation to be dated as early as 1400, see M. Bent, 'The Transmission of English Music, 1300-1500: Some Aspects of Repertory and Presentation', in *Studien zur Tradition in der Musik: Kurt von Fischer zum 60. Geburtstag*, eds. H. H. Eggebrecht and M. Lütolf (Munich, 1973), 65-93.
[84] F. Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain* (London, 1958), 32.
[85] There is some disagreement on this, for which see *Two Fifteenth Century Song Books*, ed. R. Rastall (Aberystwyth, 1990), lx.
[86] D. Fallows, 'Review of EMF 1', *The Consort* 32 (1976), 200-1.
[87] Fallows, 'Review of EMF 1', 200; The Rule of St Benedict makes similar prescriptions.
[88] Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Additional 5943, fols. 170v-1r; 178v.

cramped into the end of a gathering, while the third appears later in the manuscript.[89] All three are the words only, without the precocious notation of the other songs of the manuscript. Accounts for sums received by an archdeacon from various Somerset vicars suggest that it remained in the hands of priests up to at least 1462. As with Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Additional 7350, it appears that here we are dealing with a mischievous scribe who undermines the meaning of the collection, adding precisely the kinds of drinking song that the manuscript was at least in part originally designed to replace. One candidate could be another signature in the collection: one 'William hennyngis harper'.[90] As far as this manuscript is concerned, then, we can certainly say that it began in a religious context – but it seems that is perhaps not where its production ended.

Churchmen engaged in the transmission of 'Women's songs' for a broad range of reasons. For some, they may have been for their own interest, a language for reflecting on their own sexuality. For others, they were ways into reaching the people in their pastoral care. The significant number that appear in sermons do not reflect simple appropriation for moral effect: they are used in challenging, imaginative, even comic ways. From these examples, it is hard to imagine that the priests copying them found the songs socially threatening or dangerous. At most, they were idle words, but even idle words could be used to the 'benefit of the soul'. Perhaps others copied lyrics into their own manuscripts, for their own entertainment, and did not see this practice as being at odds with preaching against idle singing and lascivious verses in their sermons. Further, as in the case of Turke's book, we can occasionally gesture to an audience beyond priests and their congregations, as song books meant for an ecclesiastical context might end up elsewhere, travelling to an unintended user or use. Let us look at 'song books' more closely.

[89] Greene designates this hand 'Scribe F', EEC, 341-2.
[90] Cambridge University Library MS Additional 5943, fol. 5.

iii. Song Books Part I: What, if not a minstrel culture?

The signature of William Hennyngis, harper, in the margins of Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Additional 5943 introduces us to the other group most commonly credited with the production and development of Middle English lyric: the ephemeral travelling musician or minstrel. Three anonymous songbooks that contain 'Women's songs' have in particular been read as reflections of a more 'popular' oral circulation which, from time to time, minstrels supposedly recorded. These song books are: London, British Library MS Sloane 2593; Cambridge, St. John's College MS S.54; and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 176.[91] We shall begin by considering these, before turning to those manuscripts with a demonstrable provenance for musical contexts, and lastly, those songs which appear with notation.

Since Thomas Wright's first reference to the manuscripts of minstrels in 1856, scholars have increasingly problematised viewing any song collection in these terms. On the basis of references to popular saints in song collections, Greene argued that these manuscripts were monastic productions that co-opted minstrel traditions.[92] More convincingly, Julia Boffey has pointed out that if minstrels ever wrote down their songs, it was most likely on scraps of paper with little to no chance of survival.[93] Recently the scholarly discussion has for the most part moved away from whether or not we can call extant songbooks the work of minstrels. Instead, focus has moved from *who* to *how*: what were the guiding principles of form and layout? Daniel Wakelin has drawn attention to the written culture that accompanied and indeed was integral to the form of those songs designated as carols specifically. He is clear that this does not preclude an oral tradition;

[91] A fourth, usually included in discussion of minstrel historiography, is Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Eng. poet. e. 1. This MS is not discussed here. It contains one convivial women-voiced song, 'Good gossips myn', fols. 57v-59v.
[92] EEC, 306; For the failings of Greene's argument, see D. Wakelin, 'Lightening at Lynn: The Origins of a Lyric in Sloane 2593', *Notes and Queries* 48 (2001), 382-385, at 384.
[93] Boffey, *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love*, 57-8; see also A. Taylor, 'The Myth of the Minstrel Manuscript', *Speculum* 66:1 (1991), 43-73.

simply that it cannot be taken as safe that carols recorded an oral culture, as clearly some anthologies were transcribed and copied rather than overheard or remembered.[94]

MS Sloane 2593 is the earliest of the three anthologies. Its script dates it to the first half of the fifteenth century, and its dialect is of south-west Norfolk.[95] It is a uniformly presented collection written by a single scribe on paper pages measuring only 150x110mm. But this small book packs a punch: seventy-four songs are collected in its pages, with lyrics running continuously over quires without interruption to the hand, ink, or layout. Moreover, it was at some stage separated from its first forty-eight folios, and so was originally almost twice as long. As it stands, it includes one woman-voiced lyric, *As I went on ȝol day in owre prosessyon*, which we have seen centres on a macaronic play on *kyrie eleison*.[96] The scribal dialect of St John's MS S.54 is also of Norfolk, in the north-east, in two hands of c.1470-1500.[97] The two scribes work alternately and intermittently, as evidenced by the variations in the ink even within single copying stages. Like MS Sloane 2593, St John's MS S.54 is incomplete, missing at least two leaves and perhaps even a whole quire.[98] However, its binding and parchment protective wrapper may well be original, and of the kind used for travelling with loose papers. It was folded in half at some stage, evidenced by a crease. Further, the wrapping seems unlikely to have been professionally made, as it is not very skilfully put together. These factors together make it a more likely contender for being an actual minstrel's book.

However, John Stevens advises caution on the basis that the Latin of the book's macaronic lyrics is a little too competent to be the work of a minstrel.[99] Wakelin argues that the presence of

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[94] Wakelin has traced the cross-pollination between three Norfolk anthologies: Cambridge, St John's College MS S.54, London, British Library MS Sloane 2593, and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Eng. poet. e. 1. It can be noted too that Richard Hill's commonplace book also includes carols from these anthologies, suggesting that their written circulation travelled beyond Norfolk to Hertfordshire at least; Wakelin, 'The Carol in Writing', 25-50.

[95] London, British Library Sloane 2593; e-LALME, LP 4279.

[96] See above, Chapter Two, at 138-9.

[97] *LALME*, LP 8680.

[98] Taylor, 'The Myth of the Minstrel Manuscript', 64, n. 89, argues that the wrapper is large enough to have accommodated another quire.

[99] J. Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (London, 1961), 118.

two continual scribes means it is less likely to be an itinerant book; he suggests that it could have been the work of a parish priest and clerk.[100] This is one way to account for the difference in the quality of the hands; Scribe A is a small neat hand, while B is large, lacking in pen control, and far messier. *Þis enþer day I mete a clerke* is Scribe B's work. What is interesting, though, is that B uses forms not dissimilar to A, even if far less successfully. To me this suggests that the text could potentially be for educative purposes. Alternatively, and as we have seen, Palti has tentatively suggested that Scribe B could be a woman.[101] This could also account for the collaboration, making the manuscript a household production, along similar lines to Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6.[102]

Many of the lyrics in both MS Sloane 2593 and St John's MS S.54 refer in the present tense to an occasion for singing, but are not accompanied with directions or notation for performance. Additionally, for all its contrasts with MS Sloane 2593, St John's MS S.54 uses the same formatting, suggesting there was an established layout that these scribes were *copying* rather than *hearing*. Wakelin remarks: 'the book is not a record of performances but a suggestion for them – a script that may not have been acted'.[103] This does not preclude the songs from having had an adjacent existence in oral culture. Rather, Wakelin draws attention to the fact that there was an organisational logic that pervaded in a written culture. He concludes that it is possible that these texts had a lively oral tradition, but it is just as significant for Wakelin that 'Women's songs' circulated in lyric collections that may have been gathered by scribes for their generic coherence in their written form as much as for their themes.

This is helpful in addressing texts where there are no clues as to provenance. The four carols preserved in the unbound paper bifolium Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS

[100] Wakelin, 'The Carol in Writing', 32.
[101] Palti, 'Synge we now alle and sum', 180; see also Chapter Two, 98.
[102] For which see above, 163-5.
[103] Wakelin, 'The Carol in Writing', 36.

Additional 7350, Part I (Box 1), first discovered by Peter Dronke, form one such collection.[104] The worn edges suggest considerable use. Yet even standing alone, this collection helps us to understand something of the circulation of 'Women's songs'. The two sacred lyrics by the Franciscan James Ryman which occupy the verso and recto of the first page are in the hand of one professional scribe, A, of the 1490s, while the third text, *Ther was a frier of order gray*, was added in another professional *anglicana* hand, B, in c. 1500. This second scribe consciously copies Scribe A's format, writing the lyric's refrain in an enlarged heading script. Scribe B further imitates A's flourishes on the subscribed '*Finis*', but humorously expands it to 'Finis/ short & swete'. In this configuration, it is hard to read the pious lyrics with a straight face. The survival of three variations of the *Inducas* carol suggests that it was a popular song with potentially many versions, of which this is the earliest extant. The last song in the booklet, *I pray yow maydens euery-chone* is in a less formal early sixteenth century cursive hand, and attributed to an anonymous 'E'. In 1966 Rossell Hope Robbins suggested that this third hand could be the manuscript's original owner, but the first two carols may have passed between different readers for up to a decade before the third hand reaches the page.[105] It is also crossed through, from which we can either deduce that this lyric was either objectionable to a later reader by its content, or by its seeming lack of fit with the other three. This layered copying and interaction may also have been reflected in performance settings, where perhaps the *Inducas* carol was appropriate (because it was anti-fraternal?), but the even more explicit *I pray yow maydens* was not.

Where notation survives, interpreting usage is no less complicated. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 381 (Part 8) is a songbook fragment from the late fourteenth century containing

[104] For the full history of this manuscript, including a few centuries' stint as part of a laminated board beneath a vellum cover added c. 1658 to a thirteenth century English Psalter, Cambridge, King's College MS 35, see Croft, 'The "Friar of Order Gray" and The Nun', 9-14. Croft presents the connection to Cambridge, King's College 35 as a discovery; in fact, it seems likely that he got this from F. J. Furnivall's 1871 letter requesting permission to publish the texts, which he calls 'those 2 poems from the binding of the King's MS'. See S. Reynolds, '"Songes of the Frere and the Nunne": An Unrecorded Amorous Carol in a Cambridge Incunable', *Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 16:2 (2017), 297-307, at 299, n. 7.
[105] R. H. Robbins, 'The Bradshaw Carols', *PMLA* 81:3 (1966), 308-10, at 308.

French and English songs, among them *I haue set my hert so hy* and *Ie haue so longe kepe schepe on the grene*.[106] Dobson has suggested a North Midlands provenance from the dialect.[107] The songs are notated in two parts, which could be sung by two people, or one voice with accompaniment. Actual notation is rare for 'Women's songs', and in some cases their connection to a musical setting is somewhat conjectural. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 48, for instance contains ballads written by known composers alongside anonymous songs, which may suggest at least some of the latter were also intended for performance. The Registers of the Company of Stationers kept a record of printed ballads from 1557, which enables us to date some of these texts.[108] It is another small but dense volume, mostly compiled neatly although without any great care for layout by one principal scribe between 1556 and 1558 (with two supplementary hands plus later additions).[109] The focus is on ballads. David Fowler has grouped the texts by subject matter: there are thirty-three moral and religious texts; twenty satirical; fifteen amorous; and eight are narratives.[110] The woman-voiced *I have bene a meadene so longe* is one of eleven songs attributed to John Wallace, an otherwise unknown Scots or Northumbrian balladeer.[111] His lyrics are likely to form the earliest song set in the manuscript, and Andrew Taylor has convincingly argued that the difficulty of collecting such a number of single-author lyrics from circulating printed ballads makes it possible that this collection was initially intended *for* a printer, rather than the result of an interested collator

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[106] See above, Chapter Two, 147-8.
[107] *Medieval English Songs*, eds. E. J. Dobson and F. L. Harrison (London, 1979), 206.
[108] Although there are limits to the registers: labelling was erratic at best; licensing involved a fee and was not enforceable, so the lists are in no way exhaustive; and of course, the register only records when texts were licensed for printing, and not when they were composed. See H. E. Rollins, 'An Analytical Index to the Ballad-Entries in the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, *Studies in Philology* 21:1 (1924), 1-32.
[109] Although evidently over time the manuscript was repurposed as a sort of commonplace book, with the additions of a jam recipe, a deed, a prayer, and magical tables; M. Chesnutt, 'Minstrel Poetry in an English Manuscript of the Sixteenth Century: Richard Sheale and MS. Ashmole', in *The Entertainer in Medieval and Traditional Culture*, ed. F. G. Andersen et al (Odense, 1997), 73-100; For dating, see Taylor, *The Songs and Travels of a Tudor Minstrel*, Ch. 3, 82-116.
[110] D. C. Fowler, *A Literary History of the Popular Ballad* (Durham, N.C., 1968), 96.
[111] 'I have bene a meadene so longe', Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 48, fol. 81r-83r. See above, Chapter Two, 107-11; also Rollins, 'Concerning Ms. Ashmole 48', 349-350.

working from broadsides.[112] The picture is of gathering songs that had the potential to be of commercial interest, with the intention of printing them – even if this was not realised in all cases.

As we move into the sixteenth century, then, records for songs and ballads and their composers dramatically improve. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 176 also has connections to named composers; the scribe copies seventeen English lyrics, of which one is attributed to the Tudor court composer, William Cornish (d.1523).[113] This anthology is a slim paper booklet of five sheets, originally bound together but later re-bound into a larger volume.[114] The most prevalent theme of the anthology, explored in ten male-voiced lyrics, is courtly laments of love lost or unrequited, but *Let be your wanton business* and *I can be wanton & yf I will* form a kind of 'women's response'. The collection was most likely produced by someone with links to the court of Henry VIII c.1520-30.[115]

Another booklet with court connections is preserved in London, British Library MS Harley 7578, a compilation of nine manuscripts from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. The paper booklet that forms folios 84-117 is the most obviously practical musical manuscript discussed here. It is small – 145x200mm – and contains the tenor part for 34 songs, written for one to five voices and/or instruments, many of which are hymns or sections of church services, but the woman-voiced 'If I be wanton I wotte well why' is one of four amorous lyrics that feature.[116] The part-book is labelled 'Old songs used within & about the Bishoprick of Durham'.[117] One song appears to support this provenance: 'Alone walking and oft musing' refers to towns and villages north and

[112] Two further otherwise unknown authors also appear in the MS for multiple songs. See Taylor, *The Songs and Travels of a Tudor Minstrel*, 94.
[113] 'Adew adew my hartis lust', Oxford, Bodleian Library Ashmole 176 (SC 6659), fol. 100; DIMEV 221.
[114] W. H. Black, *A Descriptive, Analytical, and Critical Catalogue of the Manuscripts Bequeathed unto the University of Oxford by Elias Ashmole* (Oxford, 1845), 120-122.
[115] The dating is based on one lyric in the collection which describes watching the King dance with his daughter while the Queen looks on. It ends with a hope that a son will soon follow.
[116] British Library Harley 7578, fol. 105v.
[117] Ibid., fol. 117v.

west of Durham.[118] Yet all of the songs by identifiable composers in the part-book are, with one exception, those of London musicians, and further musicians of the Royal Chapel, largely of the second quarter of the sixteenth century.[119] Bradford Rene DeVos has noted a compelling potential connection between the Royal Chapel and Durham Cathedral. William Whittingham, Dean of Durham from 1563 until his death in 1579, was remembered in this memorial as being 'very carefull to provide the best songs and anthems that could be got out of the Queen's chapel, to furnish the quire with all, himself being skillfull in musick'.[120] DeVos suggests that Whittingham perhaps brought the part-book with him from London.[121] However, even this fails to reckon with how piecemeal the part-book itself is. The paper is consistent, but the content was evidently collaborative. The multiple hands in different inks – even within songs, such as at folios 88r-v, or 93v – combined with the date range of at least two decades for the attributable texts, render this the product of multiple writers and musicians, plus later edits and additions.[122] If Whittingham brought the part-book from the Royal Chapel to his new appointment, it seems reasonable to suggest that it had been in use there for some years previous around the middle of the century.

There are worlds between composers and minstrels, and I do not seek to suggest that there is any clear chronology that links the lyric collections of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the ballads and notated work of court musicians in the sixteenth. Below, in 'Song Books Part II', I further complicate this relationship. But the manuscripts here do serve to show some of the

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[118] The recorded provenance of the manuscripts goes back to James Mickleton the Younger (1688-1719), a lawyer of Gray's Inn, but we can go further. Much of Mickleton's manuscript collection was inherited from his grandfather, Christopher Mickleton (c. 1612-1669), who worked as a prothonotary and deputy registrar in Durham's court of common pleas and chancery court respectively. This lands us in the right locality for the manuscript.

[119] Hugh Aston (c. 1485-1558), Thomas Sternhold (c. 1500-1549), Jacobus Clemens non Papa (c. 1510-1555), John Sheppard (c. 1515-58), William Marshall (fl. ca. 1535), John Heath (fl. ca. 1550), and William Mundy (c. 1529-91) are named or otherwise attributable from concordances with other MSS, for which see B. R. DeVos, 'The Emergence of Tudor Church Music in the Vernacular' (PhD Thesis, Boston University, 1971), 238.

[120] DeVos, 'The Emergence of Tudor Church Music', 239.

[121] Whittingham has a demonstrable connection with Sternhold, above n.151, as he spent part of the Marian exile in Geneva and edited the Sternhold and Hopkins psalter. See ibid.

[122] Scribal changes in British Library Harley 7578: fols. 84r-v; 85r-86r; 86v-88r; 88v; 89r-90r; 90v-91v; 92r - 93r; 93v; 94r-105v; 106r-108v; 109r-114v; 115r; 115v-116r; 116r; 116v-117r; 117v.

mechanics of circulation of 'Women's songs' potentially or explicitly intended for musical performance. 'Song books' moved between owners, and could be repurposed for new contexts. Most were small enough to carry, and were not so preciously set out that later owners did not feel they could add notes, cross things out, and otherwise contribute to the collections. 'Women's songs' were apparently well suited to these contexts. They were thoughtfully folded into collections, whether grouped by form, theme, or imagined entertainment contexts. The manuscripts' practical usage in some cases meant that multiple musicians at different junctures may have had the chance to engage with 'Women's songs'. Thus we can usefully fold these lyrics back into the variegated mix of texts they were transmitted alongside.

A rare example of a song transmitted in three manuscripts is suggestive of the kinds of conclusions we can draw about multiple levels of musical engagement by attending to codicological detail. *And I war a maydyn* appears in several fragmented references, and in full in two manuscripts.[123] Harris gives the reference to the incomplete version in British Library Egerton 3537, fol. 59r, and argues that the speaker addresses women listeners directly: 'a pedagogical community of young women "here" "in this toune", gathered to hear her lesson'.[124] She concludes therefore that the song may be read as the warning of a sexually active woman about 'exploitation by older, privileged men'.[125] There is support from another manuscript of this song for Harris' reading. London, British Library MS Harley 1317 gives suggestions for performance, briefly referenced in a sixteenth-century note: 'And I were a mayden – Loley[126] to syng and sey as her aperythe to the syche of a ma[..] and of a talle'.[127] The performance directions here are obscure,

[123] London, British Library MS Additional 31922, fols. 106v-107; British Library Egerton 3537, fol. 59r; London, British Library MS Harley 1317, fol. 94v; London, British Library Additional MS 31922 is a fully notated version of the whole text, reproduced in *Music at the Court of Henry VIII*, ed. J. Stevens (London, 1962), 78-9. See also E. Flügel, 'Liedersammlungen des XVI Jahrhunderts, Besonders aus der Zeit Heinrichs VIII', *Anglia* 12 (1889), 225-72, at 250; J. Stevens ed., *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, (London, 1962) 42, 418-9.
[124] Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 161; Harris also cites Seimens, *The Lyrics of the Henry VIII Manuscript* (2018) for an edition from London, British Library MS Additional 31922.
[125] Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 161.
[126] MED lullai interj.
[127] London, British Library MS Harley 1317, fol. 94v

but may be read as 'And I were a maiden – Lullay to sing and say, as it appears here, like the sighs [i.e. lovesickness] of a ma[iden] and of a personal account'.[128] While 'Loley' could suggest a lullaby, it is also very common as an interjection in refrains of songs. In either case, here it signifies an expectation of singing. The direction to 'syng and sey' further supports this with an instruction to perform a call and response.[129] This, then, seems to speak to a performance style where group participation was expected, most likely on repeated lines, alongside the sighing confessional solos.

Harris' 'pedagogical community' of women is missing, however, in London, British Library MS Additional 31922, which is the only fully notated version of this song:

> And I war a maydyn
> as many one ys
> for all þ[e] golde i[n] england
> I wold not do amysse
> when I was a wanton wench
> of xii. yere of age
> Thes cowtyers w[ith] ther amorus
> they kyndyld my corage
> when I was come to
> the age of xv yere
> In all this lond nowther fre nor bond
> me thought I had no pere
>
> [If I were a maiden,
> As many one is,
> For all the gold in England
> I would not do amiss
> When I was a wanton wench
> Of twelve year of age
> These courtiers with their amours
> They kindled my lust.
> When I was come to
> The age of fifteen year
> In all this land neither free nor bond,
> I thought I had no peer.]

[128] MED tale n. 1(a) that which one tells, the oral or written relation of an event or a series of events purporting to be true, a personal narrative, an account.
[129] MED seien v.(1) 1a.(e) ~ and singe, to sing response with specified words; More usually used in reference to reciting responses in singing prayers or masses.

This is a five-part harmony, with the tune in the central line. The male tenor would be the most prominent voice, then, if sung as notated. It features in a courtly song book, composed early in the reign of Henry VIII, around 1522. Many of the pieces are attributed to the king, although *And I war a maydyn* is anonymous. The only full version, then, speaks to a courtly audience, which gives the reference to dangerous and predatory 'cowtyers' even greater weight. From this audience, it does not necessarily follow that the songbook was purely intended for trained singers. John Stevens theorised that London, British Library Additional MS 31922 was 'suitable for performance by amateurs'; anyone with a basic familiarity with notation would be able to follow the simple tune.[130]

Such works were often consumed by bourgeois audiences too, as evidenced by the other manuscripts. London, British Library MS Harley 1317 contains several autographs of the sixteenth century indicating multiple readers, and in the same hand as the song reference, Homfrey Dymoke 'the monger'. The Egerton version above is a commonplace book, with the mid-sixteenth century swan marks and autographs of one William Rayner. Rayner was a sometime high sheriff of Nottinghamshire, knighted for his services in 1603. The book entries run from earlier in his life, around 1554-78. These dates may suggest circulation of the lyric outwards from the courtly version. Indeed, during his minority in the 1550s Rayner's property was held in trust by Princess Elizabeth, and so he may well have had some opportunity for contact with cultural productions from the court. Rayner filled his book from his early twenties, through his first marriage and the birth of at least two daughters. The fragment of *And I war a mayden* appears among multiple other snatches of verse and proverbs given in Middle English and Latin; there are two hands working collaboratively, one or other filling a page, with one far more crabbed and inconsistent, although this lyric is in the more practised hand of the two.[131] It is immediately followed by another 'Woman's song', copied in Middle English and Latin, which has hitherto gone unnoticed:

Mi love is gone to london deuyll off hell go w[ith] him

[130] J. Stevens, 'Carols and Court Songs of the Early Tudor Period', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 77:1 (1950), 51-62, at 59-60.
[131] London, British Library MS Harley 1317, fol. 94v.

I shall make him cocold or he comm home
Whi wold he not take me w[ith] him

[My love is gone to London, the devil of hell go with him
I shall make him a cuckold if he does not come home
Why would he not take me with him]

This reads like a women anxious not to become an abandoned lover. In the event that he does not return, however, her response will not be to weep and sigh, but rather seek revenge via another sexual partner.

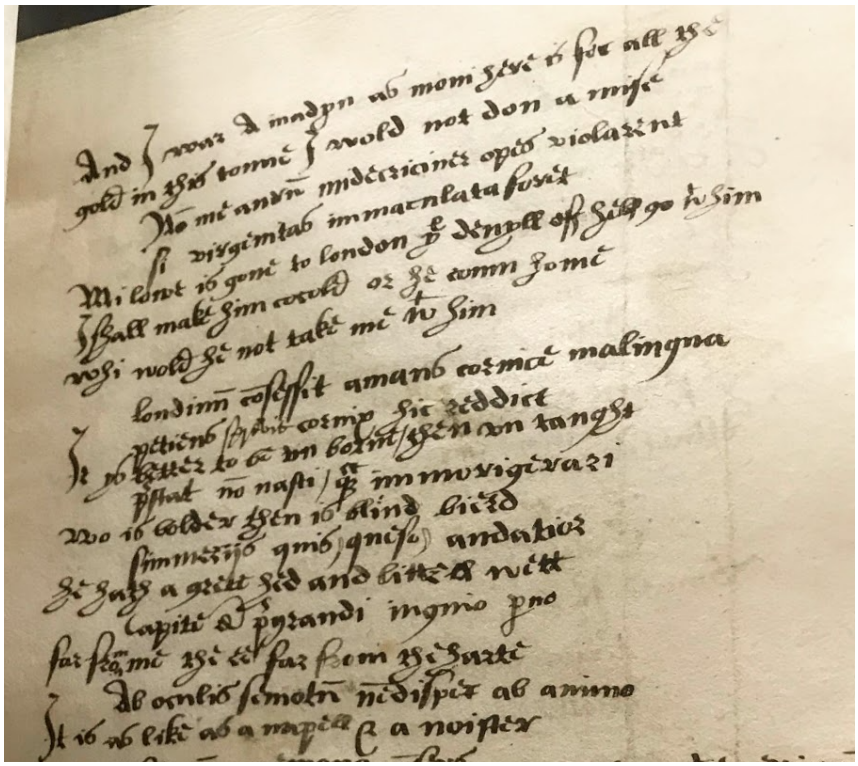

Figure 3: London, British Library Egerton 3537, fol. 59r

The remainder of the fragments collected on this folio are short expressions of a spiteful nature: better never to be born than ignorant; he has a big head and little wit; men talk like Robin Hood when they have never shot a bow; and so on. The purpose of collecting here is not certain, but could use entertaining phrases to practise Latin, suggesting that 'Women's songs' also had a place in learning or exercising language skills.

While these manuscripts are all anonymous, the extent of scribal collaboration in them nonetheless speaks to a community, sometimes of musicians and composers, otherwise of interested and informed scribes who saw 'Women's songs' as entertaining, and worthy of reproduction. Those who copied, read, or heard them would have been exposed to women's sexual gaze and their interest in attractive clerks in *As I went on ȝol day in owre prosessyon* and *Þis enþer day I mete a clerke*. They met maidens who wanted to sleep with their 'lemman' in *I have bene a meadene so longe* and *Mi love is gone to london* as well as women who rejected potential lovers in *Ie haue so longe kepe schepe on the grene*, *Let be your wanton business*, and *I can be wanton & yf I will*. In the case of *And I war a mayden*, a range of potential performance contexts for 'Women's songs' can be partially reconstructed. Finally, in *If I be wanton I wotte well why*, joy and celebration of women's genitalia proclaims itself in a collaborative songbook of skilled musicians. We certainly cannot definitively speak for a minstrel culture along the lines that Greene imagined, but to try to do so is almost to miss the point. Certainly the 'Women's songs' with complex or multi-part notation would have required expertise to compose and perform. But there is evidence here too that the producers of songbooks thought about levels of accessibility for different groups of singers, and on one occasion, specific directions for performance. Care also went into the order of lyrics, with some compilers applying organisational principles where 'Women's songs' appeared together. Even more significant is that while not all of the songbooks considered here were ever meant to be heard, others give clear indications of intention for performance. For these, the perspective of the compiler becomes one perspective among many, where our interpretations can expand to recognise that it was for any who witnessed these lyrics to judge the women portrayed in them, or not. It has been demonstrated here that 'Women's songs' were variously performed solo, with instruments, in groups, in call and response, or in structured parts – and people were listening.

iv. Urban professionals: merchants and lawyers

We leave song books for now, to introduce a new set of readers. It would perhaps be possible to come away thus far with the sense that 'Women's songs' were mostly found in lay and clerical rural households, potentially with little bearing on or connection to the lives of the kinds of women who appear in the lyrics. The example of *And I war a mayden* above has introduced us to the significance of urban provenance to lyric transmission. In this section, we explore this point further through three manuscripts owned by urban professionals.

Oxford, Balliol College MS 354 is a commonplace book compiled by Richard Hill, a London Grocer, in the first three decades of the sixteenth century. It is a standard tall account book, but it contains 247 'dyversis tales & ballattis & dyuersis reconyngis', including extracts from Lydgate, Gower, and Sir Thomas More, fabliaux, over a hundred religious and secular lyrics in English, recipes, and riddles, alongside practical business references, customs, and mathematical charts.[132] It is clear that Richard made use of both circulating manuscripts and printed texts, including a carol from Wynkyn de Worde's *Christmasse carolles*, and extracts from Caxton's early quartos. Among these are thirteen songs voiced wholly or partially by women, of which six are songs of the virgin, and a further two are death lamentations voiced by the Duchess of Gloucester and Queen Elizabeth. Two more are satires on marriage, and the last three partially woman-voiced songs, including the well-known *Nutbrown Mayde* from Arnold's *Chronicle*, include extramarital sex.[133]

Richard Hill was not the only compiler of 'Women's songs', as we have seen, but his manuscript creates a far clearer picture of its readers. What follows is an extended discussion of his book. I examine what it can tell us about the textual practices and communities of legal and

[132] Oxford, Balliol College MS 354, fol. 3; This MS was rediscovered in 1850 having been lost behind a bookcase.

[133] See full MS contents in *Songs, Carols and other Miscellaneous Poems from the Balliol MS. 354 Richard Hill's Commonplace Book*, ed. R. Dyboski (London, 1908; repr. 1937).

mercantile London, and how this might relate to their sexual practices and communities.[134] If Hill is one 'I' of the text, a myriad of children, servants, apprentices, wider family, and acquaintances also had the potential to occupy the cultural space his book constituted.

In the front pages, Hill lists the births of his five sons and two daughters, as well as their godparents and gifts given on their baptism. Four survived beyond eight years of age, but only John and Kateryn's names are not scored through, potentially suggesting that the remainder did not survive their father. For Janine Rogers, Balliol 354 provides 'a vision of what it meant to be a man with a family in the merchant community of medieval London'.[135] While only his son John leaves scribal evidence of interacting with Richard's book, we can build outwards to the social milieu in which it was created, as Richard's family and social circle are remarkably well documented. Richard was born in Langley, in the parish of Hitchin, Hertfordshire. He describes himself as a 'servuant to M. Wyngar'; he was apprenticed to John Wyngar, a grocer, alderman, and mayor of London[136]. This apprenticeship must have ended by 1508 at the latest, as in this year he was made free among the Merchant Adventurers of London. Three years later, he was sworn in at Grocers' Hall.[137] He married Margaret Wyngar, daughter of Harry Wyngar, haberdasher, in 1518.

The Hill family was large and prosperous. One relative, Sir Thomas Hill, was an alderman and mayor. Richard was also close to his cousins, who also grew up in Hitchin.[138] One of these, Margery Hill, married steadily upwards: her first husband was a grocer; the second a grocer and alderman. Her third and final husband was Ralph Astry, a fishmonger and alderman who during

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134 S. Lindenbaum, 'London texts and literate practice', in *Medieval English Literature*, ed. D. Wallace (Cambridge, 1999), 284-309; K. L. Scott, 'Past Ownership: Evidence of Book Ownership by English Merchants in the Later Middle Ages', in *Makers and Users of Medieval Books: essays in honour of A. S. G. Edwards,* eds. C. Meale and D. Pearsall (Woodbridge, 2014), 150-77; A. F. Sutton, 'The Acquisition and Disposal of Books for Worship and Pleasure by Mercers of London in the Later Middle Ages', in *Manuscripts and Printed Books in Europe 1350-1550*, ed. E. Cayley and S. Powell (Liverpool, 2013), 95-114; C. M. Barron, 'What Did Medieval London Merchants Read?', in *Medieval Merchants and Money: essays in honour of James L. Bolton*, eds. M. Allen and M. Davies (London, 2016), 43-70.

135 Rogers, 'Gender and Literate Culture', 152.

136 Oxford, Balliol College MS 354, fol. 176r.

137 *Songs, Carols and other Miscellaneous Poems from the Balliol MS. 354*, xii-xv.

138 For a full family history, tree, and discussion of Margery's personal life and business interests, see C. Martin, 'Dame Margery Astry', *The Richardian* 14 (2004), 1-31.

their brief marriage was knighted and became mayor. Ralph died shortly after his mayoralty, leaving Margery with independent control over the wealth she had accumulated from her husbands, along with a life interest in Astry's property portfolio. Margery was executor to all three of her spouses, and she pursued her interests in legal disputes throughout her 29-year widowhood. It may well be reasonable, then, to expect that Margery was literate. Her son by her second marriage, John Revell, died leaving a widow, Joan, with whom Margery publicly fought a long-standing legal battle over Revell's property. Joan was the daughter of a printer, John Rastell, and niece of Sir Thomas More. She too would spend her life surrounded by books – a detail to which we shall return. The closeness of these branches of the family are demonstrated in part by Ralph and Margery's wills: the former's will was witnessed by Richard, and the latter left bequests to the married siblings of her 'cosyn Richard Hill'.[139] During their marriage, Ralph took one Robert Hill as an apprentice (probably the son of Sir Thomas), as well as a servant, Agnes Hill, who may have been Richard's younger sister.[140] The Hill family then were upwardly mobile and politically active. They supported each other's legal interests, and were socially and professionally intertwined by their households and guilds. It is in this context that we must situate Richard's book.

Richard's book contains material intended for education, both intellectual and social. Proverbs are copied in English and then translated to Latin, for memorable sentence constructions, and four courtesy books are directed at children. Perhaps most revealing are the literary extracts that Hill selects, and the material he places in conversation with them. Two extracts from Gower's *Confessio Amantis* deal with the transgressing male body, especially exploring the link between drunkenness and sexual violence.[141] In the tale of the wedding of Pirotus and Ipotacie,

[139] Ralph also demised property to Richard's master John Wyngar, and Elze Astry, Margery's daughter-in-law, stood as godmother to Richard's children. Martin, 'Dame Margery Astry', 2-4; 20.
[140] Agnes was at most around 12-14 years old when Margery married in 1493, as her older brother Richard finished his apprenticeship in 1508, and so was probably born in the early 1480s. In his will, Ralph Astry left 5 marks to Agnes, to be given on her marriage. She is also remembered in Margery's will as Agnes Gascoyne – by then, she had been married and widowed three times, and was herself living independently at Graveley Hall.
[141] 'Good Gossips Myne', Balliol College 354, ff. 83v-84v.

the bride is subjected to sexual violence at her wedding by drunk mythical guests.[142] In Galba and Vitellius, two rulers of Spain are put to death by their subjects for their drunken and habitual attacks on women.[143] Both tales warn that excessive drinking robs men of reason and causes them to commit sexual violence.

How the wyse man tawght his son counsels avoidance of taverns.[144] Yet, Richard's book also contains multiple drinking songs. In one, drunken men repeatedly bawl at their butler to 'fill þe boll [bowl]'.[145] But these are not as much in contradiction with the courtesy and didactic texts as first appears. The butt of the joke is consistently men who lack control. This drinking song is immediately preceded by *Bonjowre, bonjowre a vous*, which portrays a drunken singer in a 'howse' or tavern:

> I am cum my self alone,
> To appose you, on by on
> Let se who dare say nay!
> Sir, what say ye?
>
> [I am come myself alone
> To test you one by one
> Let us see who dares say no!
> Sir, what say you?][146]

The speaker here challenges his listeners to a singing competition, insulting any and all ('ye with your fat face') and issues comedic threats ('Syng softe, I say, lest yowr nose blede') with an increasingly 'belligerent' tone.[147] We may well imagine that for Hill and his milieu, this figure represented the worst of their social group. In affecting good manners with French greetings the drunk singer seeks to appear above his station, but his aggressive competitiveness belies this.

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142 J. Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, eds. R. A. Peck, A. Galloway (Kalamazoo, 2004, 3 Vols.), iii, Bk. VI, ll. 484-530.
143 Ibid., ll. 534-595.
144 'How the wyse man tawght his son', Balliol College MS 354, fols. 157r-158r.
145 'How, butler, how', Balliol College MS 354, fols. 251r-252v.
146 'Bonjowre, bonjowre a vous', Balliol College MS 354, fol. 251v.
147 B. O'Donoghue, '"Cuius Contrarius": Middle English Popular Lyrics', *A Companion to the Middle English Lyric*, ed. T. G. Duncan (Cambridge, 2005), 210-26, at 220-1.

Drunken misbehaviour is not restricted to men. Hill's book also portrays the tavern culture of women, in particular the unruly wives of *Good gossips myne*.[148] In this women's song, wives bring food from their homes to the tavern, stealing out of the house. They speak of the beatings they have received, the debts of their husbands, and loudly share news, food, and drink. This text demonstrates the potential for women to destroy their husbands' reputations through excessive speech and public drunkenness. But the behaviour of their husbands is also portrayed as disorderly, and of the kind that other lyrics in the book warn as being unbefitting of a merchant. Perhaps then it is also possible to consider these bawdy wives as being the products of male misrule, where their sexual speech is a mirror of their husbands' poor authority. Indeed, when one wife fears that her husband will cane her if he sees her, another responds: 'She þat is a-ferde, lette her flee… I dred no man'.[149] Another wife tells how her husband beats her 'lyke þe devil of hell'.[150] The response here is that men achieve nothing by beating and striking women – and the proof is tangible, as beatings have not stopped these wives.[151] The lesson is not simply that wives gathered together will inevitably gossip and complain. It hardly seems coincidental that their husbands are all excessively aggressive men who do not have control of their finances and household.[152]

Lyndal Roper's examination of guild and fraternity drinking cultures in sixteenth-century Germany reflects this same preoccupation. Ritualized drinking in this context encouraged guild solidarity – but could easily become a threat to public order:

> Man is understood as a creature who is always breaking through the boundaries of his own body, to the point that he threatens social order. He is a volcano of drives and fluids which constantly threaten to erupt, spilling outwards to dirty his environment through

148 Balliol College MS 354, fols. 206v-207v.
149 [she that is afraid, let her flee…I dread no man]. 'Good Gossips Myne', ll. 43-47.
150 [like the devil of hell]. 'Good Gossips Myne', l. 81.
151 'Good Gossips Myne', ll. 86-89; Another song portrays a husband who hits his wife so hard she falls to the ground in the street. This backfires; she calls out that he has near-killed her, and his bad reputation spreads as 'he þat sawe yt, told yt me'. 'A lytill tale I will you tell', fol. 249; DIMEV 96.
152 B. Kümin, 'Useful to Have, but Difficult to Govern: Inns and Taverns in Early Modern Bern and Vaud', *Journal of Early Modern History* 3:2 (1999), 153-175, at 158-9 on women as guests in taverns; A. Cowell, *At Play in the Tavern: Signs, Coins, and Bodies in the Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor, 1999), Ch. 3, for the moral economy of the tavern.

> ejaculation, bloodshed, vomiting, defecation. Drinking, which, in the view of the preachers, released all social inhibitions, gave free rein to lusts.[153]

Richard's grouping of texts, that first establish a rule around public drinking, then demonstrate the negative and sexually violent effects of drunkenness, and lastly reveal how drunkenness impacts a man's public image, roundly teach a lesson that is alert to the specific concerns of urban elite households. But these texts also create a particular picture of what sexual violence looks like: it is alcohol-driven, monstrous, and a sign of churlishness.

The literary texts of Richard's book examine women's behaviour, but the chief concerns appear to be civic and familial responsibility. There is a tension around what kind of manners women ought to imitate, making clear that ideas above your station are almost as objectionable as demeaning activities. The concern is about maintaining status, and not moving too far up or down. One partially woman-voiced song, *Drawe me nere*, explores the sexual morality of the nobility; a baron's daughter who is 'nyse' [sexually loose] and 'dangerus' [domineering] is beguiled by a juggler who is an expert 'prikker' [pricker] and 'prauncer' [prancer], descriptors we may recall from *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day*.[154] There is no negative outcome, and the song ends thus:

> God & owr Lady & swete Seynt John
> Send euery giglot of this town such an oþer leman[155]
>
> [God and our Lady and sweet Saint John
> Send every loose woman of this town such another lover.]

On one level, the song might simply be interpreted as a critique of the perceived sexual laxity of noblewomen, but the *fabliaux*-like joke moral somewhat undermines this. At its most mischievous, the lyric call for more expert (male) lovers. It further allows for joking about sex and hierarchies, while steering clear of the tensions surrounding marriage and relationships in the mercantile rank of society. A contextual reading might place this in the marriage market of fifteenth-century

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153 L. Roper, 'Blood and Codpieces: Masculinity in the Early Modern German Town', in her *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994), 107-25, at 112.
154 'Drawe me nere', Balliol MS 354, fol. 251; For sexual connotations of this phrase, see above, Chapter Two, 128.
155 Ibid.

London. Women who married upwards were a consistent feature of London's elite and, as Sylvia Thrupp has shown, were far more likely than their brothers to marry into gentry families.[156] This was the cause of some resistance and caution on the part of merchant families. Equally, by avoiding sexually compromising situations or places, they could expect to marry well.

While these values may feel hypothetical or somewhat abstract in Richard's book, his family demonstrate the dangers of both. Margery was a highly visible widow constantly mired in legal battles with her widowed daughter-in-law after her socially climbing marriages. After the death of Sir Thomas Hill in 1486, one of his daughters, another Agnes, found herself called to the Consistory Court in January 1487. John Croke the younger, a draper, sued Agnes to enforce a contract of marriage that would be advantageous to him, but was deeply opposed by her family.[157] As Agnes' own deposition cuts off too soon to know whether she understood herself to have consented to marry, we are left simply with the picture of her family, friends, and servants gathering around her to contest it.[158] Her brother was warned not to break the peace against Croke, and one John Dawes, most likely a cousin, repeatedly called Croke a knave when Agnes was first summoned to answer the case.[159] Sir Thomas had left £140 in trust for his children when they came of age – but in 1488 it appears that Agnes was still underage, and Croke was still disputing her dowry with Agnes' mother and brother.[160] However on 13 December 1490, almost four years since his initial suit, Croke acknowledged satisfaction for Agnes' patrimony.[161]

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156 Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 265-8; see also S. McSheffrey, 'A Remarrying Widow: Law and Legal Records in Late Medieval London', *Worth and Repute: Valuing Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honour of Barbara Todd*, eds. K. Kippen and L. Woods (Toronto, 2011), 231-52.
157 The brother of John Croke the elder, who appears in the Stonor Letters ii no.183 thanking William Stonor for his efforts promoting a match for him with a gentlewoman.
158 LMA, MS DL/C/A/001/MS09065, 251v; John Dawes testifies that 'Presentibus tempore citacionis huiusmodi isto jurato, dicta Agnete, domina Elisabeth Hil matre eiusdem Agnetis, Willelmo Hill, Jacobo [....], domino Roberto Harrison, Nicholao Lamberd, et quadam serviente dicte domine Elisabeth nuncupata Margareta, necnon Elisabeth Hill et non pluribus ut recolit'. LMA, MS DL/C/A/001/MS09065, fol. 13r.
159 CLRO, Journal 9, fol. 262r; LMA, MS DL/C/A/001/MS09065, fol. 13r; McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture*, 118, n. 27.
160 CLBL 237-8, 249; CLRO, Journal 9, fols. 262-3.
161 CLRO, Journal 9, fols. 265v, 266r-66v; CLBL, 249 n. 1.

Though no autograph connects these women to Richard's book, we can readily believe them to have formed part of the audience that was imagined in its compilation. Indeed, the partially woman-voiced ballad of *The Nutbrown Mayde*, which appears in Hill's book, begins by invoking an audience where men are pitted against women: 'Be it right or wronge/ Thes men amonge/ on wymen do complayn' [Be it right or wrong/ These men, from time to time,/ of women do complain].[162] This ballad is a dialogue between a woman and her lover, who has been banished. He warns that if she joins him in outlawry, people will condemn her for her 'wanten wille' and call her a 'nysse woman' [a sexually loose woman].[163] At the close, he reveals that he is no outlaw, but a nobleman, and they marry. While we have no way of accessing Agnes' subjectivity in the case above, we can say with some certainty that her kin were reading or performing a ballad that actively rewards a woman who agrees to cohabit with a man in the woods, and romanticises clandestine marriage between young people of differing social status.

Hill's book self-consciously prepared young people for how to present themselves as members of London's mercantile community, and their civic and familial responsibilities.[164] 'Women's songs', where women are enthusiastic sexual partners or are otherwise ill-served by their husbands, formed a part of this education. There is not much moral coherence in Balliol 354, but sexual violence is consistently presented in a negative light. When taken with the sexual playfulness of *Drawe me nere* and *The Nutbrown Mayde*, the resulting picture is a great deal more complex than reproduction of manners. Richard's selections may well have been shaped by how he viewed the experiences of his immediate family circle; but by the same token, the texts had the potential to shape behaviours within this community.

Hill is not unique among his milieu in preserving 'women's songs': two other collections which we can attribute to urban professionals are extant. San Marino, CA, Henry Huntington

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162 'The Nutbrown Mayde', Balliol College MS 354, fol. 210v.
163 Ibid.
164 For the pedagogic function of household books from a civic perspective, see D. Mason, 'London Chronicles and the Civic Sense of the Past, c. 1430-1516' (PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2020).

Library MS EL 34.B.60 is mostly a mix of old tenures copied by Robert Furthe in the second half of the fifteenth century, but also contains autographs and two lyrics written by multiple owners or readers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, of which two can be associated with the Inner Temple, London.[165] One Rychard Brokysby copied two lyrics into a spare page, *O lord so sweet Sir John doth kiss* and *I must go walk the wood so wild*. The signature at the top of the page, 'I Rychard Brokysby' is the same hand as the lyrics.[166] Fragments of both, albeit with slightly different wording, are scrawled into margins in a hand in keeping with the signature of 'Robert brokesby'.[167] It is a rushed and messy hand, and he repeatedly turns the page before the ink is dry. Later readership is indicated with various signatures throughout, including 'Anthony Furthe', who was admitted to Inner Temple in 1526, one 'Mystres Anne Bulleyn' in the mid-sixteenth century, and 'John Bullocke', who also appears in later Inner Temple Records. This manuscript is so interesting because of the scribal engagement within one manuscript with the lyrics, as well as an extended readership. One might imagine the later autographs reading the lyrics early in the book, only to have 'Ser John' crop up at regular intervals through the remainder.

Durham, University Library MS Cosin V.ii.13 is a literary collection dating from the second quarter of the fifteenth century which appears to have been owned by a pepper merchant family at the close of that century, and later a fruiterer. It is one of the few manuscripts considered here that has a considerable historiography, as it contains a carefully copied edition of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Hoccleve's *Letter of Cupid*. Few accounts, however, note the presence of three anonymous lyrics, and indeed none of these has received sustained critical attention. Equally passed over is the ownership of this literary collection.[168] The earliest autograph, that of

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165 San Marino, CA, Henry Huntington Library MS EL 34.B.60.
166 Ibid, fol. 11-11v.
167 Ibid, fol. 73v (*O lord so sweet Sir John doth kiss*); fols. 108v; 109; 107v. (*I must go walk the wood so wild*); see fol. 82 for Robert Brokesby's autograph.
168 Most recently, Kara Doyle does not note the presence of the fifteenth century autograph given here, for which see her *The reception of Chaucer's shorter poems, 1400-1450* (London, 2021), 80; The scribes of this MS, however, have been considered as Chaucer and Hoccleve copyists. See R. K. Root, *The Manuscripts of Troilus and Criseyde: with Collotype Facsimiles of the Various Handwriters* (London, 1914), liii; J. Boffey, 'The reputation

'Agnes|Robert peppyrsmith', is contemporary with the slanting and poorly organised late-fifteenth-century hand of *The bakarse boy is vere Craynke*, a first person lyric which comments on a sprightly assistant baker alongside women who fall pregnant, or otherwise resist temptation:[169]

> pore Contiense dyed long a Gowe
> and frynd by love lye vere lowe
> for Tuve[?] Gave her soch a blow it killed her
> bomeing bese is Gott w[ith] Chyld
> and daynte dell is not beGyld
> the mon be tamed that ar so wylld[170]
>
> [Poor Continence died long ago
> And friend by love lie very low
> For Tuve[?] gave her such a blow it killed her
> Booming Bess is got with child
> And Dainty Dell is not beguiled
> She must be tamed that is so wild]

The lyrics potentially place the manuscript, or at least the composer, near London, as Westminster Hall is mentioned.[171] Unlike the other anonymous lyrics of the manuscript, *The bakarse boy* does not follow scribal formatting with brackets. It is a nonsense poem, but women's extramarital sexual activity is a consistent theme: Along with the various women above, 'prette pegge' [Pretty Peggy] will not be touched for she is 'none of thyne' [not yours], and another beats her husband. A further man begins to think he has to marry. The lyric is chaotically written; one page is upside down and part of the text begins to trail sideways and upwards to add in some extra lines. The aaab verse structure is mostly consistent, if sometimes a push, apart from one verse that breaks the form. It is no *Letter of Cupid* – but the curious parade of gossips, wantons of all genders, and the occasional household pet in the pursuit of a 'Good Boye' is not so very distant from Criseyde's fears about being the subject of gossip, or indeed from Hoccleve's contribution to the *Querelle de la Rose*.

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and circulation of Chaucer's lyrics in the fifteenth century', *Chaucer Review* 28:1 (1993), 23-40; D. Wakelin, *Immaterial Texts in Late Medieval England: Making English Literary Manuscripts, 1400-1500* (Cambridge, 2022), 99, 133.

169 'Craynke' means sprightly, lively, or merry. Probably from Middle Dutch; Nicholas Udall uses it in this sense in his *The first tome or volume of the Paraphrase of Erasmus vpon the Newe Testamente* (London, 1548), fol. xx: 'He who was a little before bedred […] was now cranke and lustie'. STC 2854.5.

170 Durham University Library MS Cosin V.ii.13, fols. 3r-2v.

171 Durham University Library MS Cosin V.ii.13, fol. 3r, l. 13.

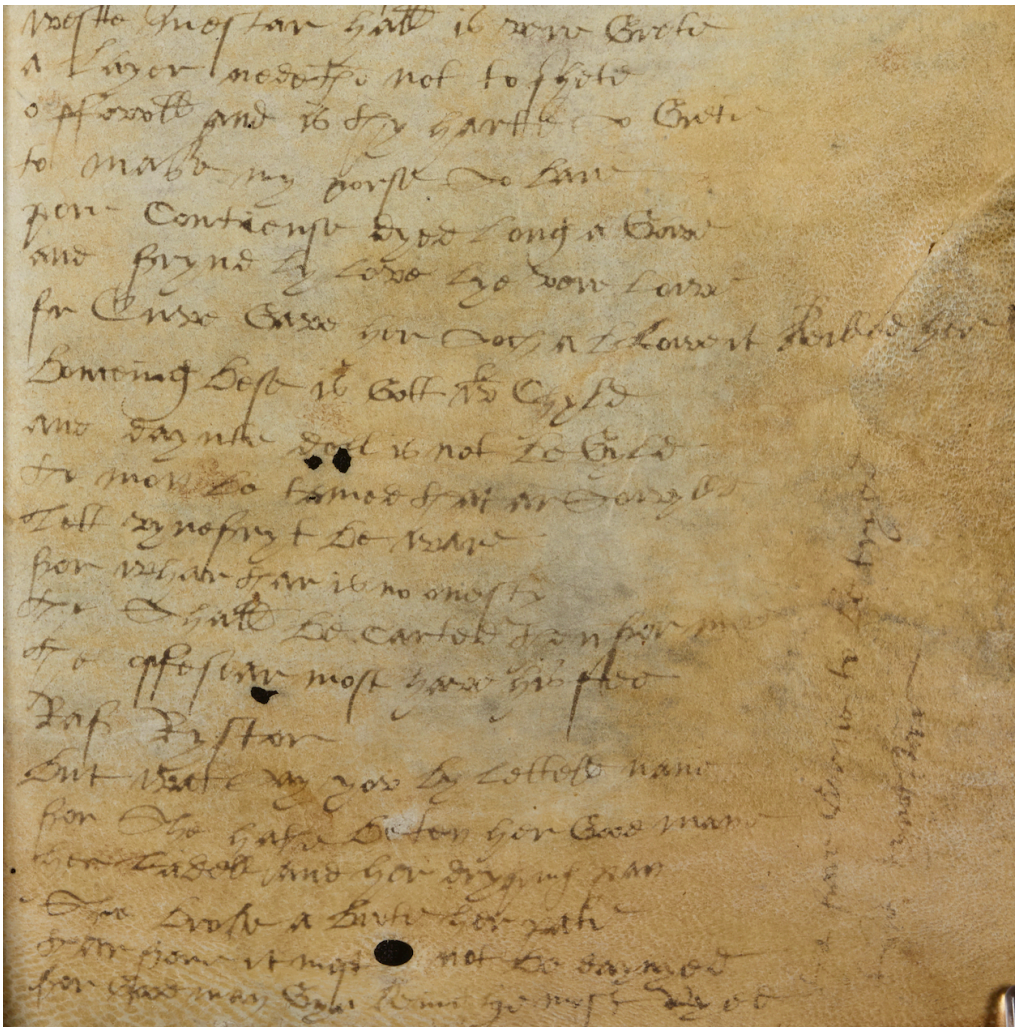

Figure 4: Durham, Durham Cathedral Library MS V.ii.13, fol. 2r

As we can see from these examples, Hill's Book is rare in how much we can say about the people most likely to have had some contact with it. It is also unusual in scale and ambition. Focusing on this context-rich manuscript renders visible what can only be suggestive for the other two manuscripts surveyed here: Huntington Library MS EL 34.B.60 clearly had multiple readers, but only pockets of verse; DUL MS Cosin V.ii.13 is a literary production, and though much can be said of the scribes of the professional elements of the manuscript, the lyric about women's sexuality sits somewhat apart. We have next to no context for who produced it beyond their clearly not being a practised hand. However, all three demonstrate engagement with lyrics about women's sexuality in professionals' households in the opening decades of the sixteenth century. In the case

of the two lesser-known manuscripts, we may conclude that 'Women's songs' were encountered not only as conscious contributions to a carefully organised collection, but as scrappy entertainment on the edges of more serious artistic and professional output.

v. Song Books Part II: Early printed music books

By the time all of the lyrics in the previous section where being copied into commonplace and household books, 'Women's songs' were appearing in a new medium; that of printed songbooks. We have already introduced figures with links to the early phases of book production, and printing: John Shirley, and Joan Astry. We have seen that Shirley copied 'Women's songs', while Joan was, at least for a time, part of a family network where she was both literate and potentially had access to song texts. In this section, I am going to demonstrate the interconnectedness of 'Women's songs' circulating in manuscripts and early printed music and song books. There is cross-pollination in earlier texts, but this becomes far more visible with the advent of print. Printing also enables us to consider commercial value – a factor that is much more difficult to ascertain for manuscript editions.

Prior to the advent of printing, the book trade was separated into individual trades, from the skilled illuminator to binders to shopkeepers. The roles in early printing, on the other hand, of selecting a text, printing, distributing, and selling, could be and often were all performed by a single person.[172] The jurisdiction of regulating printed books fell increasingly under the Stationers' Company. Initially fairly low in the hierarchy of London's companies, the Stationers rose in civic prominence over the first half of the sixteenth century up to their incorporation in 1557. Two early printed books, STC 5204.5, and STC 22924, contain 'Women's songs'. Neither contains evidence of ownership, but we can speak to the context in which they were printed, and their printers.

[172] C. P. Christianson, 'The Rise of London's Book-Trade', *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 3, 1400-1557*, eds. L Hellinga and J. B. Trapp (Cambridge, 2008), 128-147, at 129-131.

STC 5204.5, *Christmas carolles newely Imprynted* appears from its front page to have been printed at the Long Shop in the Poultry, near St Mildred's Church, by Richard Kele, c.1546-1552.[173] This is not quite what it seems. Kele was a stationer and publisher, but never owned a printing house. In this case, the actual printer was Robert Copland, and perhaps also his son William Copland.[174] To claim that Kele printed the book was not exactly misleading, however, as by the 1540s it was common for publishers to claim credit for printing books.[175] Further, the book is a collation of three booklets and a further four leaves printed as discrete collections. The first, an eight-leaf booklet, leaves no blank spaces: instead of starting songs on a new page, every available line is used. Embellishments are few, conventional, and basic.[176] The second booklet, where our songs are found, no longer has a title page extant. The pages are numbered, and the type face is slightly improved. There is more embellishment than in the first booklet, albeit still crude and including a favourite ornament of Kele's, a small leaf. We might conclude that over a period of a few years up to his death in 1552, Kele commissioned several inexpensive song booklets, which one owner bound together and viewed as a set.[177] The circumstances of the production of a printed text are very different from that of privately or professionally produced manuscripts. Printer and publishers had to decide what was viable, and whether a particular format or text would attract an audience. A short booklet was low risk, and further instalments could be produced on the basis of the success of the first.

The content of this collection is largely religious in nature; songs on the Passion, particularly from the perspective of the Virgin, feature heavily. Otherwise, there is one nonsense pastoral song, and two bawdy songs. Of these, only *It was a mayde of brenten ars* is partially woman-

[173] San Marino, CA., Henry Huntington Library, 'Christmas carolles newely Imprynted', STC 5204.5.
[174] The Long Shop had previously operated as a printing house, but all the books published in Kele's name 1543-52 were printed by known printers. See Blayney, *The Stationers' Company*, 422.
[175] Robert Copland was a stationer better known for his work as an author and translation, as well as printing texts with and for Wynkyn de Worde.
[176] The only ornamental letter can be found on 'Christmas carolles newely Imprynted', p. 5.
[177] The change in style and type set may be attributable to William Copland taking over the printing house c. 1547. Although William continued to use many of Robert's ornaments, initials, and *textura*, his first few books feature new typefaces.

voiced.[178] The second bawdy song, *The nunne walked on her prayer*, is one of the three 'Inducas' carols.[179] Unlike the c.1500 *Ther was a frier of order gray* in Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Additional 7350, the nun of this song does not speak.[180] She meets with a friar, and is beginning to fall asleep when he kneels down at her feet. The reader might expect a chivalric profession of love and devotion. Instead:

> This fryer began the nunne to grope;
> *Inducas,*
> It was a morsel for the Pope,
> *In temptationibus.*[181]
>
> [This friar began the nun to touch[182] [lit. grope];
> *Lead us*
> It was a morsel for the Pope,
> *In temptations*]

This variation is obviously far less nuanced and far more contracted than *Ther was a frier of order gray*, discussed above.[183] While belonging to the same genre, it lacks the sustained musical metaphor of its precursor, nor does it attempt to pun in Latin within the stanzas. The addition of the comment on the papacy expands the critique from a particular monastic order to Catholicism in general. This is in no way surprising, as Kele was committed to the Fleet Prison in April 1543 as a 'printer' who had printed (or rather in his case, published) unlawful books, along with seven others.[184] In 1543, a more conservative expression of Henrician orthodoxy was in progress; in February, Convocation was tasked with censoring service books. This resulted in a backlash against printers producing those service books. Kele had previously published a reformed primer, and was imprisoned on suspicion of evading licensing regulations under these more stringent regulations.

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178 'Christmas carolles newely Imprynted', pp. 18-19.
179 Ibid., pp. 19-20
180 'Ther was a frier of order gray', Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Additional 7350, Box 1.
181 'The nunne walked on her prayer', 'Christmas carolles newely Imprynted', pp. 19-20.
182 MED gropen v. 1(d) to touch amorously, play with, fondle.
183 See above, Chapter Two, 116-19.
184 Blayney, *The Stationers' Company*, 548.

Perhaps his household was under particular scrutiny for radicalism, as in the same year one of his apprentices was also arrested for 'medlynge with bokes prohybted'.[185]

Printing adds a dimension that we do not have in the cases of commonplace books: the suggestion of commercial value. In the case of the 'Inducas' carols, we can be surer than usual that their appeal was widespread and lasting. In Nicholas Udall's 1542 translation of Erasmus' *Apopthegmes*, his gloss on Fescennine verse (classical Latin ribald poems) makes the following comparison:

> syngyng merie songes and rymes for making laughter and sporte at marryages, euen like as is nowe vsed to syng songes of the Frere and the Nunne, with other sembleable merie iestes, at weddynges, and other feastynges'.[186]
>
> [singing merry songs and rhymes for making laughter and entertainment at marriages, even like as is now used to sing songs of the Friar and the Nun, with other similar merry jests, at weddings and other feasts.]

Later snatches of 'Friar and the Nun' lyrics can also be found in several early modern plays and broadsides.[187]

Until recently this apparent tradition was thought to have survived only in the two texts discussed here. However, thanks to Suzanne Reynolds, a further witness can now be added.[188] Queens' College, Cambridge, C.4.11 is a printed Vulgate Bible produced in Naples in 1476 and imported to England in the late fifteenth century. On the front flyleaf a text in a careful cursive sixteenth-century hand is headed *Inducas in temptacionibus*.[189] It is heavily scored through, but

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185 LMA, COL/CA/01/01/011, 158r.
186 D. Erasmus, *Apophthegmes*, trans. N. Udall (1542), reproduced in *The English Experience, its Record in Early Printed Books Published in Facsimile*, No. 99 (Amsterdam, 1969), 245.
187 Croft most obviously points to songs referenced in Shakespeare which are textually similar, in *All's Well that Ends Well*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Croft, 'The "Friar of Order Gray" and The Nun', at 7; H. Chettle, *Kind Harts Deame* (London, 1593) references of a song called 'of the frier and the nunne', and gives a fragment: 'He whipt her with a foxes taile, *Barnes minor*/ And he whipt her with a foxes taile, *Barnes maior*'; *The Common Muse: an anthology of popular British ballad poetry*, ed. V. de Pinto and A. E. Rodwar (London, 1957), 297-8, includes a late seventeenth century ballad in which a greyfriar offers to sing a young woman out of hell if she will give him her maidenhead. The narrative turns on him very quickly.
188 Reynolds, 'An Unrecorded Amorous Carol', 300.
189 'Inducas in temptacionibus', Cambridge, Queens' College MS C.4.11, front flyleaf.

recoverable. The fourth and final verse demonstrates the crassness of this lyric in comparison to the wordplay of earlier versions:

> The Frere toke the Nonne by the thyghe
> *Inducas*
> And sayd good sporte was very nyghe
> *In temptacionibus*
>
> [The friar took the nun by the genitals[190] [lit. thigh]
> *Lead us*
> And said good sport was very near
> *In temptations*][191]

Reynolds calls this version 'analogous [to] but entirely independent' of Kele's edition.[192] As with the latter, the Latin is limited to the burden. However, it loses even Kele's fairly regular sense of metre. It draws away from musicological and liturgical satire to a corporeal imagining of the text. The 'lead us', here, is much more literally read as a hand moving from toe, to knee, to thigh.

Other inscriptions in the book give some indication of the social context in which the song may have been sung and copied down. There is another aggressively scored out note on fol. 2, but the Norfolk family name *popye* is legible.[193] The names of two owners can be found on the final leaf: Dorothy Cowper, widow of William Cowper Esquire, and her second husband George Freville, a Cambridge lawyer, Justice of the Peace, and MP whom she married in 1549.[194] We can say with some certainty that for five years between the death of her first husband and her remarriage, the book was in Dorothy's collection, although she does not autograph it herself: in the inscription, Freville asserts his 'right' [*iure*] to ownership of the Bible by his marriage. Lower down the page, in a very similar hand, there is a note on standardising the system of measurement of land. Reynolds argues for its relevance for the seizure of church property and assets. As a

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[190] MED thigh n. 1(d) the buttocks; rump; the genitals.
[191] 'Inducas in temptacionibus'. Another English hand of similar date, in blacker ink, adds beneath the carol '*tercio die octobris circa horam noctis nonam*'. Reynolds suggests this might be unrelated, or potentially the occasion of singing or writing down the carol. I would add that is could provide an imagined scenario for the fictional tryst.
[192] Reynolds, 'An Unrecorded Amorous Carol', 302.
[193] Cambridge, Queens' College MS C.4.11, fol. 2.
[194] Ibid, fol. 2z8v.

member of the Middle Temple, Freville advised in, and furthered his own, tenurial interests.[195] The carol is not in the same hand, but at the very least, Reynolds is right to point out that the Friar and Nun topos may well have 'acquired a renewed and highly politicised topicality' for those who potentially stood to gain from the Crown's land acquisition and redistribution during this period.[196] However, Freville did not write the lyric. Indeed, it may even have been him that attempted to decimate the lyric as well as the evidence of previous owners.

There is no simple chronology to track here, of the 'Inducas' carols moving from manuscript to print. Instead, versions flow freely between media, most likely via oral circulation of the kind Nicholas Udall described above, at weddings and other festive gatherings. But manuscripts could also reproduce items previously in print; printed song books were in part collated via ephemeral written collections and apparently well-known tunes; and printed books could be a site of handwriting lyrics.[197]

STC 22924, *XX Songes, Impryntyd in London at the […] signe of the Black Morens*, contains three erotic lyrics explicitly voiced wholly or partially by women: two trios, *Min hartys lust & all my pleasure* and *Be war my lytyl fynger*, and one group 'Women's song', *The bella*. A further six lyrics, all in three parts including a bass and a treble, explore courting, extramarital sex, and heartbreak.[198] While a treble could indicate a young male voice, it just as easily suggests a context where men and women sang these songs together. *XX Songes* has proved impossible for scholars of typeface and early printing to place in connection with any particular printing house with any certainty. Even its name

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[195] A summary of Freville's career can be found at: http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/freville-george-1502-79. (Accessed 25/3/21).

[196] Reynolds, 'An Unrecorded Amorous Carol', 305.

[197] Another notable example of handwritten lyrics in the flyleaves of an early printed book is Cambridge, Trinity College MS VI.18.2, fol. 77r-v. This copy of *The Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres*, printed by Caxton in 1477, contains three lyrics: a woman-voiced version of Chaucer's 'Madame that throgh your newfangelnesse', titled 'Yong man for yovr nowfangellnys'; A lover's complaint, 'Alass to chom schall I complane'; and a bawdy woman-voiced poem, 'Manerly Magery Mylk and ale' by John Skelton, for which see A. S. G. Edwards and L. R. Mooney, 'A New Version of a Skelton Lyric', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 10:4 (1994), 506-10.

[198] 'So gret vnkyndnes', 'Who shall haue my fayr lady', 'Mynyon goo trym', 'Joly fellow Joly', 'And wyl ye serue me soo', 'My harte my mynde', 'Loue wyll I'.

is piecemeal: STC 22924 is missing the title, while the title leaf survives only as a fragment used for binding in Westminster Abbey, and cuts off the printer's name and part of their address.[199] Some historians have been tempted to link this expertly printed early music book to Henry Sutton's 1550s print shop called the 'Black Moryan', or sometimes the 'Black Boy'. However, Sutton was not printing in 1530, and Peter Blayney has further demonstrated that any precursor to Sutton's shop probably would have had a different name.[200]

If we cannot say *where* 'XX Songes' was printed, we can instead tentatively point to *who* printed it. It is simple enough to rule out a number of active printers, either because they did not print music, or by type face.[201] In fact, two of the woodcut initials are so distinctive that they are found only in one other text, printed by John Rastell, a composer who produced the first known example of printed secular music in England in the early 1520s.[202] Rastell is not, however, the printer of 'XX Songes', as this book is far superior in quality, but the printer was likely to have been close to Rastell. They were able to imitate (and improve) Rastell's impression printing from moveable notation type, as well as borrow his initial blocks.[203] Blayney makes a highly convincing argument that the only man meeting all the criteria for an otherwise unknown printer trusted by Rastell was his daughter Joan's third husband, John Heywood.[204] Joan, we may remember, was Margery Astry's daughter-in-law via Joan's first husband John Revell, who died in 1517.[205]

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199 H. M. Nixon, 'The Book of XX Songs', *The British Museum Quarterly* 16 (1951-2), 33-5.
200 K. F. Pantzer, 'Printing the English Statutes, 1484-1640: Some Historical Implications', *Books and Society in History*, ed. K. E. Carpenter (New York, 1983), 69-114; Blayney, *The Stationers' Company*, 269.
201 J. Milsom, 'Songs and Society in Early Tudor London', *Early Music History* 16 (1997), 235-93, at 285-7.
202 Blayney, *The Stationers' Company*, 264.
203 The printer also produced sheets of empty printed staves, suggesting a demand for professional and amateur musicians to transcribe or compose with greater ease.
204 Heywood is best known as an author and playwright, for which see P. Happé, 'Heywood, John (b. 1496/7, d. in or after 1578), playwright and epigrammatist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2020), https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2648/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-13183, accessed 13 March 2021.
205 See above, 198.

In his twenties, John Heywood had a career as a royal musician precisely at the time that London, British Library Additional 31922, discussed above, was circulating in court.[206] He appears in Henry VIII's household books as a 'synger', and later a 'player of virginals', but joined the Stationers' Company on his marriage.[207] Blayney argues only for Heywood as the printer, but we might as readily argue for the couple jointly. Joan and John Heywood had tried to secure a lease for a major printing house which had been promised to Joan *solely* before their marriage. By her second husband, Joan was daughter-in-law to the printer Richard Pynson.[208] Pynson had signed an obligation that Joan would succeed him as the tenant of his premises, the George, but Pynson successfully reneged on the bond when Joan presented her claim jointly with Heywood.[209] This would not, however, preclude them from making use of Rastell's equipment. It further follows that it is unsurprising that they did not go on to produce further extant identifiable books, as in mid-1530 Heywood secured a lucrative city office of Common Meter of Linen Cloth.

There can be no conclusive evidence that the Heywoods were responsible for 'XX Songes', but as Blayney suggests, 'it would be difficult to find a better qualified suspect'.[210] No other survey of 'Women's songs' has noted the connection between 'XX Songes' and Balliol College 354 – perhaps in part due to this connection only being visible when we put Margery Astry and Joan Heywood into the picture. The result, though, is suggestive of a common thread of 'Women's songs' across London's guilds, reaching as high as the King's court via widows, wives, and daughters.

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[206] Before John Heywood arrived at Henry's VIII's court as a musician, he was a student (although he did not obtain a degree) at Broadgate's Hall, Oxford.
[207] Blayney, *The Stationers' Company*, 264.
[208] Pynson's daughter Margaret married a Grocer and, like Joan, was almost certainly literate as she features in a deposition allegedly being asked by her father to find the obligation letter for an old apprentice's bond. Joan may have also spoken French, her father's native language. PRO CI/649/33.
[209] Blayney, *The Stationers' Company*, 253. See also S. H. Johnston, 'A Study of the Career and Literary Publications of Richard Pynson' (PhD Thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1997).
[210] Blayney, *The Stationers' Company*, 273.

CONCLUSION: EVERYONE'S SONGS

The contribution of this chapter is to broaden and balance the various groups, readers, and interpreters of 'Women's songs' without losing sight of their significance as invitations to explore and imagine women's sexual subjectivity. When we have information about readers, I have demonstrated the ways in which we might consider the privileges and preoccupations that different social groups might bring to their interpretation. Alongside this, I have argued for a literary culture where women's sexual subjectivity is important both to men and women of a variety of life stages and social positions. The outcome is a textual community that was far wider than we have previously acknowledged for the genre. To have various categories of men identifying with the 'I' of the Women's Songs points towards a greater complexity of response than we might have imagined. When I hinted at the beginning of this chapter about male sublimation of women's pleasure, I do not mean this in the way that it has been understood to date, where a male reader will inevitably take the lyrics ironically or aggressively, with the woman as an object of ridicule, censure, or objectification. Adult men typically read from a position of power – that is undeniable – but at times, perhaps the enunciation of sexual experiences that are joyful might cause men to read themselves into the first person of the text, into the position of seeking and receiving pleasure. The general absence of condemnation in the handling of lyrics about women's sexual subjectivity supports a reading of identification alongside, and perhaps even above, one of judgement.

Nowhere is this tension more apparent than in those manuscripts where we can reconstruct a community of clerical readers. Churchmen might variously engage with 'Women's songs' to confirm women as temptresses, or to better understand their parishioners as well as their own experiences. Lyrics could be appropriated into sacred music traditions, or used to engage parishioners in sermons. Sermons that invoked 'Women's songs' as authorities or *themata* demonstrate nuanced and humorous interpretations. The engagement of preachers and their audiences are surely ambivalent to an extent, but do not necessarily respond to that ambivalence by doubling down on a misogynist vision of sexuality.

Manuscript song books in which 'Women's songs' form part of an anthologising project are hard to place contextually but can speak to multiple scribes collaborating and conversing about sexuality, with women's pleasure forming a facet of their collections and contributing to a collective understanding of sexuality. With the advent of print, the transmission between media proliferates; with attentiveness to printers, we can see a community of engagement that moved as fluently across social strata as it did technologies of production.

Urban households, too, might have been interested in exploring women's sexuality for the social education of their children and dependants, but 'Women's songs' could provide entertainment for convivial occasions as well as helping to structure responses to sexual misbehaviour. Through an extended consideration of the Hill family and Richard Hill's commonplace book, I have shown that 'Women's songs' can and should be read as both a comment on, and a means of shaping sexual lives within urban households.

I have demonstrated a textual world that was extensive and at times overlapping, both through written processes of copying and transmission and through people. 'Women's songs' are everyone's songs. The range of readers, and methods and mediums for reading examined here supports my overall argument that varied or multiple readings of texts should be brought together. Depictions of sexuality that included women's pleasure and their choices spoke to readers of all genders (and all sexualities), and they helped to constitute a strand of acceptance and exploration of sexuality that countered more prohibitive lines of thought.

CHAPTER FOUR: SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY AND COURTS

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Four, I address the question of whether the acts, spaces, and expectations expressed in 'Women's songs' are also reflected in social practice. Given the problems of voice that have been discussed in Chapter Two, these songs were clearly not a reflection of their social world in any straightforward sense. I use a range of ecclesiastical and urban civic court records to point to some of the practices and attitudes implied or illustrated by the songs. This will enable us to explore whether the lyrics demonstrate something of how women who had sex outside of marriage, or were reported to have done so, understood their experiences and were viewed. I contribute to the existing historiography of sexual regulation by arguing that regulatory sources might, paradoxically, reveal a degree of flexibility around sexual misbehaviour within communities. I offer a social and cultural history in light of the sensibilities that I have explored in the preceding chapters. The premise is this: if we carry forward the insight that expression of women's sexual subjectivity was neither unthinkable nor necessarily to be damned, we might look with new eyes at court records.

Regulatory sources from late medieval England sought to establish definitions of misbehaviour, identify instances of this behaviour, and to shape (and be shaped by) communities' responses. The large-scale demographic work of Marjorie McIntosh and, more recently, Martin Ingram, has used legal records to reconstruct attitudes to sexuality, and from there, both historians have produced important overarching narratives of how 'misbehaviour' was understood.[1] Regulatory records, by their very nature, begin with the assumption that a deviant behaviour has taken place. For example, ecclesiastical visitations heard reports directly concerned with extramarital sex, whether fornication or adultery, although the determination or outcome is rarely

[1] McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehaviour in England*, 160; Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge*, 146-7.

recorded for these. In exploring practices and attitudes to women's pleasure, I am precisely dealing with these sources because they were based on normative frameworks which categorised licit and illicit behaviours. Cases of contested marriage in consistory courts, meanwhile, give glimpses of the places, activities, and social groups where people met, as well as the expectations and responses of couples and the people around them.

When we imagine what extramarital sex for women might have looked like, we understandably tend to gravitate towards a picture of consequences, whether penance, fines, or attempts to restore order via a marriage. It is important not to assume the outcome, however, given that these do not survive. Even where sentences were recorded, we cannot be sure they were carried out. Sara McDougall has suggested that in late medieval France, women had more to fear outside the courtroom than within. By this, she means that despite general historiographical consensus that punishment for illicit sex was much more aggressively policed for women than for men, this does not appear to be evidenced in legal records for adultery and fornication.[2] I proceed with McDougall's findings for northern France in mind, to consider the relationship between punishment via court mechanisms, and community censure.

Instances where singlewomen came into contact with sexual regulation, whether formal or informal, can also help us to situate their sexual activity in the households they inhabited, the labour they engaged in, and their social opportunities and spaces. Here, civic court proceedings such as those of London's Court of Aldermen are useful in understanding overlapping jurisdictions where sexuality and households were concerned. Legal sources, whether civic or ecclesiastical, are not straightforward to use for examining the lived realities and sexual subjectivity of singlewomen. One of their potential weaknesses is that they do not deal with behaviour that was tolerated and did not come to court. These instances should prompt us to consider the stages of mediation and

[2] S. McDougall, 'Judging Sexy Women in Late Medieval France', *Postmedieval* 13 (2022), 81-104; idem., 'The Opposite of the Double Standard: Gender, Marriage, and Adultery Prosecution in Late Medieval France', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 23:2 (2014), 206-225; idem., 'Pardoning Infanticide in Late Medieval France', *Law and History Review* 39:2 (2021), 229-253, at 230-31.

informal resolution that were attempted before a case reached a court. They also prompt consideration of whether there was a threshold of acceptable versus unacceptable behaviour.[3]

Ecclesiastical and civic court proceedings enable us to recover the role of households and the wider community in managing singlewomen's sexuality. These cases do not just tell us about consequences, but help us to situate what happened when relationships came to public attention as sexual misbehaviour. A range of informal and formal responses are described in a court setting, including but not limited to surveillance and reporting. More informal resolutions following discovery of extra-marital sex could offer an alternative, or precursor, to legal proceedings. Depositions and witness statements cannot provide a complete picture: what do they offer is a snapshot of how a group of people presented their understanding of a relationship in a judicial setting. Words, gestures, touches, and premarital sex are brought to bear. From these women's witness statements, mediated as they are, we can better understand the ways in which they experienced sexual regulation, and how regulation impacted their sexual experiences. In the wranglings of the aftermath of sexual relationships, pleasure may feel distant; it is our task to hold it in balance with the complex narrativization of sexuality in a public setting.

Approaching Regulatory Sources

Regulation took many forms. I draw here on civic records of guild disciplinaries, ordinances, and civic disputes alongside the more detailed cases from consistory courts, as well as visitations. The consistory courts took shape in the mid-thirteenth century, although archdeacons and local deaneries did hold courts of varying frequency and procedural complexity before this time.[4] The cause papers and act books of these courts are only extant from thirteen dioceses of late medieval England, but substantial records of private litigation survive from several ecclesiastical courts. The

[3] For similar questions in another context, see S. McDougall and E. J. Hutchison, 'Pardonable Sodomy: Uncovering Laurence's Sin and Recovering the Range of the Possible', *Medieval People* 37:1 (2022), 115-146.

[4] R. H. Helmholz, *The Oxford History of the Laws of England, Volume I: The canon law and ecclesiastical jurisdiction from 597-the 1640s*, ed. J Baker (Oxford, 2004), 139-42.

cases I examine here are primarily drawn from the archives of London and York; I have also consulted secondary sources for smaller urban centres, in particular Hereford and Lichfield.[5] The discussion is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the development or administration of these institutional bodies, nor a quantitative treatment of sexual cases – rather it is an examination of what individual cases can tell us about sexual subjectivity. I build on the work of numerous scholars who have illuminated the social experiences of women using legal records from the manor, chancery, and borough courts, as well as those who have focused on ecclesiastical courts.[6] Depositions from the consistory courts offer something that the former, more laconic records of secular courts cannot: a sense of how people portrayed themselves in a court setting.

The Church Courts operated through a process of enquiries, inquests, reports, and private litigation. Presentments were made *ex officio* by church authorities against people suspected of illicit sexuality, alongside such offences as scolding.[7] While the court issued the citation, local residents could less formally report wrongdoings by providing the information to initiate proceedings.[8] Suspicions had to be publicly known in order to constitute *fama*, or one's reputation; Bronach Kane, however, has argued that this knowledge may have been more likely to be weaponised when local relationships broke down.[9] Citations list names, some details of the charge, and the ascribed

[5] J. Werner, 'Promiscuous Priests and Vicarage Children: Clerical Sexuality and Masculinity in Late Medieval England', in *Negotiating Clerical Identities*, ed. Thibodeaux, 159-181; A. J. Kettle, 'Ruined Maids: Prostitutes and Servant Girls in Later Medieval England', in *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society*, eds. R. R. Edwards and V. Ziegler (Woodbridge, 1995), 19-31.

[6] J. M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (Oxford, 1987); H. Jewell, 'Women at the Courts of the Manor of Wakefield, 1348-1350', *Northern History*, 26 (1990), 59-81; K. Jones, *Gender and Petty Crime in Late Medieval England: The Local Courts in Kent, 1460-1560* (Woodbridge, 2006); C. Beattie, 'Your Oratrice: Women's Petitions to the Late Medieval Court of Chancery', in *and the Law, 1300–1700*, eds. B. Kane and F. Williamson (London, 2013), 17-30; A. Finch, 'Repulsa Uxore sua: Marital Difficulties and Separation in the Later Middle Ages', *Continuity and Change* 8 (1993), 11-38; M. Sheehan, 'The Formation and Stability of Marriage in Fourteenth-Century England: Evidence of an Ely Register', *Medieval Studies* 33 (1971), 228-63.

[7] Poos, 'Sex, Lies, and the Church Courts', 585–8.

[8] Ibid, 587.

[9] B. Kane, 'Neighbourhood and Local Knowledge in Later Medieval England', *The Experience of Neighbourhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. B. C. Kane and S. Sandall (Abingdon, 2022), 30-47; See also I. Forrest, *Trustworthy Men*, 195-6, on the capacity of that group to establish what was publicly accepted.

penance, rendering the role of the community somewhat opaque. Yet it is apparent that just as legal mechanisms shaped attitudes, communities used the law to their advantage.

Private suits, on the other hand, relied on extensive witness testimony. This kind of litigation concerned marriage suits such as contested marriage or impotence, as well as defamation. These suits, known as instance cases, began with a citation delivered by the summoner to the defendants.[10] The allegations on which the case was based were provided in a document called a libel, and presented in oral or written form to the defendant, who could admit or (more likely) deny them. The libel was then expanded into positions. These were a series of positive statements on the part of the plaintiff, where each claim was a separate point for the defendant to answer. Points agreed upon were held to be proved. Witnesses needed only to be produced for contested statements, which could be drawn up into another document of articles, although in practice these were often combined with the positions by the fifteenth century.[11] Depositions of witnesses required these parties to speak to the articles, as well as any additional interrogatories provided by the deponent. The latter were usually designed to undermine either the witnesses' credibility or encourage them to provide contextual information to help the defendants' case. Witnesses were expected to give detailed accounts of behaviour, demeanour, gestures, conduct, events, and relationships, and in so doing they revealed much about their own attitudes and agendas as well as those of their communities and households.

Legal historians have approached consistory court testimony in a number of ways. Pedersen and Helmholz amongst others have done much to demonstrate individuals' engagement with canon law in their presentation of their case.[12] Their studies show how far people who interacted with the courts understood the workings of canon law, and how able they were to navigate, or even manipulate, these intricacies.

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[10] B. Woodcock, *Medieval Ecclesiastical Courts in the Diocese of Canterbury* (London, 1952), 45-9.
[11] See Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, Ch. 1 for a full description of procedure and associated documents.
[12] F. Pedersen, *Marriage Disputes in Medieval England* (London, 2003); Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*; J. A. Brundage, *The Medieval Origins of the Legal Profession: Canonists, Civilians, and Courts* (Chicago, 2008); Richard M. Wunderli, *London Church Courts and Society on the Eve of the Reformation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

In their studies, Donahue and Goldberg have sought to track patterns of litigation through quantitative analysis.[13] Both historians have identified contexts in which women litigants, deponents, and witnesses were most likely to appear. Outcomes are largely unquantifiable, however, as sentences rarely survive, and chance instances where an individual appears in later proceedings, or in other records that confirm the outcome, are few and far between. Indeed, it is often only when litigants contested the result that we know what it was. Goldberg combines his quantitative work for York with attentiveness to the social context of the individuals he studies. He makes suggestive conclusions about what a comparatively small sample size can say about wider experiences of class and gender. Shannon McSheffrey is also interested in what consistory courts in London can tell us about experience and social norms.[14] Her extensive work on the London consistory includes her *Consistory* database, from which the cases from the London Consistory treated here are drawn.[15] For McSheffrey, the consistory courts are crucial to understanding the relationship between patriarchy, governance, and sexual reputation in London's civic culture, for both men and women. The public nature of the court's efforts to identify and categorise sexual disorder meant that it was a key forum in which jurisdictions and authority could be expressed. Her work is foundational in what follows. I seek to build on her findings from a slightly different vantage point. Court records also reflect individuals' sexual subjectivity, and were a space where this subjectivity was important.

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[13] C. Donahue Jr., *Law, Marriage, and Society in the Later Middle Ages: Arguments About Marriage From Five Courts* (Cambridge, 2007), viii–ix; P .J. P. Goldberg, 'Gender and Matrimonial Litigation in the Church Courts in the Later Middle Ages: The Evidence of the Court of York', *Gender & History* 19 (2007), 43-59; M. Ingram, 'Spousal Litigation in the English Ecclesiastical Courts c.1350- c.1640', in *Marriage and Society: Studies in the Social History of Marriage*, ed. R. B. Outhwaite (New York, 1982), 35-57.

[14] S. McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia, 2006); see also D. O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (New York, 2000); L. R. Poos, 'The Heavy-Handed Marriage Counsellor: Regulating Marriage in Some Later-Medieval English Local Ecclesiastical-Court Jurisdictions', *American Journal of Legal History* 39 (1995), 291-309.

[15] Consistory Database: Testimony in the Late Medieval London Consistory Court, ed. and trans S. McSheffrey (2022), hereafter CD; All following translations and references for LMA consistory cases are from this database, unless otherwise specified.

In recent years, efforts to recover subjectivity in legal archives have developed to consider multiple selves and the performance of subjectivity.[16] This has produced an analytical shift from a recognition of individual experience to the structuring and expression of those experiences.[17] John Arnold's work on inquisition has been instrumental here. His arguments about how far it is really possible to reach the subjectivity of legal subjects is in part based on a recognition of how fora impacted expression: people brought multiple selves to a situation depending on 'the arena in which subjectivity is provoked, contained, and performed'.[18] Here too we find the influence of Bakhtin: the pioneering work of Garthine Walker for the early modern period argues that multivocality also plays a role in individuals' self-fashioning in a legal context.[19] Some historians have pushed back against this turn towards discourse. For Tom Johnson, centring multivocality may not 'take seriously enough the legal frameworks in which the witness testimonies were produced'.[20] The discussion of discourse has been combined, then, with that of technicality in the earlier works of Helmholz and Pedersen – a recognition that bringing a case has to be done in a way that enables it to be argued within the framework of canon law. Susan McDonough has argued for late medieval Marseille that neighbours demonstrated 'degrees' of agency, dependent on their access to and knowledge of these legal frameworks, in the production of their legal evidence.[21] Witnesses in English church courts drew on their experiences in ways that conveyed strands of subjectivity as much as tenets of canon law or the interests of plaintiffs and defendants.

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[16] N. Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987).

[17] Another framework for thinking about this distinction is emotion (external and socially constructed) and affect (internal and individual), for which see E. Sedgewick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity* (Durham, N.C., 2004), 109.

[18] J. Arnold, *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc* (Philadelphia, 2001), 109

[19] G. Walker, *Crime, Gender, and Social Order in Early Modern England* (New York, 2003), 7, for discussion of Bakhtin's impact on Walker's methodology.

[20] T. Johnson, 'The Preconstruction of Witness Testimony: Law and Social Discourse in the Reformation', *Law and History Review* 32:1 (2014), 127-147, at 139.

[21] S. McDonough, *Witnesses, Neighbors and Community in Late Medieval Marseille* (New York, 2013), 67-95.

Regulating Sex in Households

The lyrics examined in Chapter Two do not threaten institutional retribution for extramarital sex or pregnancy, whether in the manorial or ecclesiastical courts. Nor, indeed, does the conduct literature examined in Chapter One. What is emphasised more in women's songs and didactic material is the role of local networks and households in policing relationships. *How the Goode Wife* is predicated on advice coming from within a household setting, with the consequences for sex-related behaviour being a lost reputation in their community.[22] *Ladd y the daunce* ends with the rage of the speaker's mistress, who beats her and tells her that her unruly behaviour 'wel in wel be sene' [will be seen for what it is]. In *Þis enþer day i mete a clerke*, the speaker worries 'qwat xal I say' to cover up her pregnancy.[23] In this section, I seek to understand the mechanisms through which singlewomen's sexuality was policed within non-natal households. Singlewomen demonstrably can be found in a range of occupations within households. As servants and apprentices, they would be expected to come and go, on errands and business. Small wonder then, that anxieties about conduct were more directed at these women, who were thought to be under limited surveillance. Their behaviour was further conceptualised as reflecting not only on themselves, but on the household to which they belonged. The risk of sexual misbehaviour was thought to be higher when young people moved away from their natal homes, which facilitated meeting and engaging in sexual activity in their new surroundings away from the discipline of parents.

Women's working lives held few guarantees, with typically yearly contracts and little to no accountability if the terms of their employment were breached by either party. Women might learn a craft as an apprentice, but they are barely visible to us in any kind of sustained record.[24] Yet, such evidence as is available outside of court records is suggestive of a broad range of labour for women, where they would have regular household or professional contact with men outside of their kin.

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[22] See Chapter One, 48.
[23] See Chapter Two, 134.
[24] For the greater documentary evidence of women apprentices in a later period, see L. Gowing, 'Girls on Forms: Apprenticing Young Women in Seventeenth-Century London', *The Journal of British Studies* 55:3 (2016), 447-473.

There are no surviving women servants' contracts, but for evidence of the regulation of singlewomen's sexual lives we can look to a handful of extant indentures for women apprentices. Indentures set out a normative framework for expectations of employed women's behaviour. Where these survive, they indicate rules about the conduct of men and women apprentices, including that neither was allowed to marry nor engage in sex outside of marriage. Apprentices such as Nicholas Kynghlay of York (1371) were specifically barred from sexual relations within the master's house, or with women of that household.[25] The seven-year contract made between Katherine Nougle, the sister of a haberdasher, John Nougle, and a silkthrowster called Avice Wodeford in London in 1392 shows that similar preoccupations were in play in women's contracts.[26] The proscriptions binding Nougle are broadly similar to those routinely contained in male indentures. She was not permitted to enter a tavern unless on her mistress' business, nor to marry without the 'assent, will, and counsel' of her brother and her uncle. However, the implication is still that young women were expected to avoid peer interactions and social drinking. The anxiety behind this is clear:

> She shall not commit fornication or adultery in the house of her said mistress […] nor play in any unlawful or shameful games whereby her said mistress may have any loss [*in aliquo deteoretur*].[27]

Both Nougle and another apprentice, Elizabeth Eland were ordered (1454) not to commit fornication within the house of their masters or outside, and Eleanor Fyncham was bound (1447) not to commit fornication 'in any way at all'.[28] It is not entirely clear what kind of games Nougle

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25 *York Memorandum Book*, ed. J.W. Percy, Surtees Society 186 (Gateshead, 1973), 4-5; R. M. Karras, *Common* Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England (New York, 1996), 166, n. 41; eadem., *Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, 2003), 128-9; *Records of the Borough of Leicester, extr. from the archives of the corporation*, ed. M. Bateson et al, (7 vols., Cambridge, 1905), iii, 50 (contract dated 1543).

26 F. Riddy, 'Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text', *Speculum* 71:1 (1996), 66-86, at 72 n. 26; On silkthrowsters, see J. M. Bennett, E. Clark, S. Westphal-Wihl, and M. Kowaleski, 'Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages: Fifty Years after Marian K. Dale', *Signs* 14:2 (1989), 474-501, at 486, n. 34.

27 LMA, COL/CHD/AP/05/019.

28 Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 83. Interestingly Fyncham is described as the daughter of a Norfolk gentleman, fitting with the claims of the silkwomen below.

is being barred from. In Chapter One, we saw a variety of games that were linked to sexual behaviours, which would render the loss here one of repute.[29] But it could also describe gambling, itself a marker of ill manners, and could refer to monetary loss on behalf of the mistress.

Women living in non-natal households were expected by their employers to refrain from public behaviours associated with sexuality, as much as actual pre-marital sexual activity. This might suggest an overriding concern to maintain the reputation of young women, as this reflected the reputation of the household.[30] However this did not necessarily extend to employers ensuring safety *within* the household: in 1423, Alsoun Bostone was condemned to three stints in the pillory by the Mayoral Court for 'having let to hire for immoral purposes her innocent young apprentice'.[31] Moreover, surveillance could operate in both directions: in a contested marriage of 1408, a servant was called as a witness to his master's alleged bigamy. He testified that his master William and second wife Alice were never formally married, but that 'once during Lent when William could not for conscience's sake have carnal relations with Alice, he heard him say, "Do not worry, Alice. I will always love you and never send you away".'[32] But in the case of Katherine Nougle, it is evident that rules about sex were made not only for the apprentice's sake, but also to protect her mistress' reputation. The continued freedom of women like Avice Wodeford to practice their crafts was partly dependent on the 'conduct and behaviour' of their apprentices.[33] Indeed, the London silkwomen were keen to emphasise that their households were respectable; in their 1455 parliamentary petition their overtures included that they 'lyved full honourably, and therwith many good Householdes kept, and many Gentilwymmen and other in grete noumbre like as there nowe

[29] See above, Chapter One, 42-4.
[30] S. E. Mawhinney, 'Coming of Age: Youth in England, c.1400-1600', (PhD Thesis, University of York, 2015.
[31] She was brought from the gaol with 'pypys' and other 'minstralsy' to announce her coming; CLBL, K, 11b.
[32] See Goldberg, *Women in England*, 124.
[33] 'Ordinances for keeping watch and ward, 1294', CLBL, B, 242.

be moo than a mille, haue be drawen under theym in lernyng the same Craftes and occupation ful vertueusly'.[34]

The general shape and preoccupations for apprentice-women's contracts do not look so different to those for apprentice-men. We see nothing, however, of how these reported thousand mistresses and their women apprentices negotiated sex and its potential consequences. Because women were overwhelmingly not entered into guild registers, we tend not to see them in the formal regulation of guild disciplinaries. This absence, while men were visibly punished, may in and of itself be instructive. We might surmise that because economically independent women were the subjects of heightened sexual surveillance, as we saw in Chapter One, the pressure to keep (or be kept in) an ordered household had higher stakes for women than for men. Reputation was not only for reputation's sake: it was also a matter of safety, and the ability to continue living independently. Perhaps the masters and mistresses of apprentice-women dealt with misbehaviour within the household instead of invoking guild disciplinaries. If so, the regulation of their behaviour may have been closer to that of servants, whom householders were permitted to 'chastise' within a specific set of parameters – a matter to which we shall return.[35] We can also look at citations of apprentice-men. These regularly came to the attention of both the mayor's and ecclesiastical courts for sexual relationships with women who were servants, within and across households. When their sexual relationships came to court, we hear much more from the men and their masters than from the women. If they gave statements, these do not survive. However, these cases are useful in that they help us to understand the systems that women servants were operating in. We see that their partner's punishment for sexual misbehaviour was an orchestrated event, and

[34] […lived most honourably, and within many good households kept, and many gentlewomen and others in great numbers likely to now be more than a thousand, have been kept under them in learning the same crafts and occupation most virtuously]. 1455 PROME.

[35] E. Hawkes, 'The "Reasonable" Laws of Domestic Violence in Late Medieval England', *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*, eds. E. Salisbury, G. Donavin, M. L. Price (Gainesville, 2002), 57-71; J. A. Brundage, 'Domestic Violence in Canon Law', *Violence in Medieval Society*, ed. R. W. Kaeuper (Bury St Edmunds, 2000), 183-197; B. Hanawalt, 'Violence in the Domestic Milieu of Late Medieval England', *Violence in Medieval Society*, ed. R. W. Kaeuper (Bury St Edmunds, 2000), 197–214.

we see their masters' priorities and potential range of responses. From here, we can at least begin to construct the impact for servant women.

Clearly not all guild households were impeccably ordered. In June 1436, one Richard Goun, apprentice of Richard Kerby, draper, was brought before Chancery by writ to the Mayor of London. Goun was imprisoned for running away with, and marrying, Alice Herward, an orphan (and therefore under the remit of the City). Goun had likely been in the household for less than twelve months, as he was registered as a new apprentice the same year.[36] Herward was herself apprenticed to Elizabeth Nevyle, a silkwoman.[37] Masters who found their servants or apprentices engaging in fornication or unsanctioned relationships also had recourse to a range of public actions outside of court. In 1534, another London draper, John Hends, enacted violent punishment on his apprentice John Rolls after finding him 'upon Passyon Sonday…in naked bed, within hys seid hous' with a 'mayd servant' of the house, Margaret Byllyngton.[38] It appears that the sex itself was less of a problem than the fact that it took place in the draper's house, and that afterward Rolls 'boste' [boasted] to other apprentices, 'gevyng very yll ensample to other young men apprenticed of the same craft'.[39] There is one John Byllington who was a draper active in the mid-to-late 1510s; perhaps it was his daughter who joined another draper household as a servant, which also potentially contributed to the severity of the punishment.[40] Hends took the case to the Drapers' Company, which agreed that Rolls should be stripped and beaten by hooded members of the Company with twopence worth of rods until they broke. It was the master's decision here to keep the punishment within the guild, and evidently the wardens agreed that this was reasonable. And yet, even within this case there were a range of both expectations and judgements, as the apprentice was clearly proud of his encounter and discussed it with other young men.

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[36] Records of London's Livery Companies Online, www.londonroll.org (accessed 31/05/21,), hereafter LLCO.
[37] CLBL, K, 163.
[38] Nothing more of Margaret appears in the case. M. K. McIntosh, Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620 (Cambridge, 2005), 126.
[39] W. Herbert, *The History of the Twelve Great Livery Companies of London* (2 vols., London, 1834-7), i, 424.
[40] For John Byllington see LLCO.

We might expect bragging of sexual conquests from apprentice-men, but even among apprentices, attitudes towards sex outside of marriage varied. The apprentice Anthony Pontisbury, a mercer's son, was arrested on his master's writ for trespass and imprisoned for marrying against his contract. The woman is not named. Pontisbury justified his marriage by arguing that the prohibition on apprentices marrying was 'contrary to the lawes of godde and causeth moche fornication and adultery to be within the seid citie'.[41] Even more specifically, he emphasised the mutuality of their genuine attraction: 'havynge an inward love to a young woman…and the yonge woman havynge the same unto him intendying they both to live under the lawes of god', they had married. How are we to take these arguments together – that temptation to fornicate was a present concern, but his (and her) love was proper? This is a readily identifiable trope. Perhaps Pontisbury thought that presenting the court with unlicensed marriage to avoid fornication would help his case. He placed himself and his new wife within a spectrum of misdemeanour where theirs was the lesser. We have the sense of multiple subjectivities coming to the fore. Most obvious is his rejection of the strictures of apprenticeship. The intriguing concept of 'inward' love, which here reads as a marker of emotional authenticity or good intention, is accompanied by a moral argument about marriage being for the purpose of avoiding fornication. One conclusion to draw is that romantic impulsiveness – a sudden and unsanctioned marriage – was best excused by the avoidance of moral failure through extra-marital sex.

Yet marriage to neutralise extra-marital sex was still problematic. Pontisbury's case was heard by the Court of Aldermen because the marriage was a breach of employment contract, brought to the court by his master. We move now to thinking about ecclesiastical courts, where plaintiffs were often one of the sexual partners. Consistory courts made a distinction between fornication and sex with intent to marry, dealling with them accordingly. The contested marriage suit in the York consistory court of John Waryngton and Margaret Barker in 1417 is illustrative of

[41] TNA, PRO C1/67/185, quoted in S. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London, 1300-1500* (Ann Arbor, 1989), 193.

the methods young people could use to extricate themselves from a potential marriage after being discovered fornicating.[42] Waryngton and Barker worked for the cordwainer John Bown, but their master struggled to regulate and control the relationships in his household. Barker was certainly a servant. It is not entirely clear whether Waryngton was an apprentice or a servant, but his argument that he should be helped to set up a shop suggests the former. We see from the depositions that he had previously been in sexual relationships with servants within the cordwainer's household; but despite being warned by his master never to so transgress again, Waryngton was caught with Barker in a 'suspicious place…where the hay lies', an upper room of the house, on a subsequent occasion.[43]

Bown did not immediately jump to arranging a marriage – his first instinct was to have Waryngton put in prison, presumably for breach of contract by fornicating in his master's house. But a witness, John Gamesby, advised him to 'think carefully' and see first if Waryngton would marry Barker. This conversation appears to take for granted that Barker would want the marriage. Their master forced the two to contract; Waryngton claimed that marriage would only be possible if his master was 'sufficiently good and generous to him that he would be willing to make Barker a wife and do honour to her so far as he was able'. The contingency of this promise is circular: in order to marry, Waryngton needed to be set up with his own workshop, in which only his master could assist him. The marriage itself becomes secondary here to a set of concerns around mastership and financial support.

Barker's position, meanwhile, is almost impossible to ascertain. She seems to have agreed to the marriage, but whether or not she spoke words of contract is not even mentioned. Further, at the point of the depositions, Barker appears to be living in the house of John Marshall, tailor. It seems reasonable to conclude that she either chose or was made to leave the household once it became clear that Waryngton had no intention of keeping the marriage oath he had made in the

[42] B.I.H.R. York CP.F.127, quoted in Goldberg, *Women in England*, 110-114. Goldberg's trans.
[43] Goldberg, *Women in England*, 110-114.

presence of witnesses. That this case was heard at all demonstrates that Waryngton was able to argue that his contract should be annulled on the basis that he had not freely consented. Indeed, his master testified in Waryngton's favour, as did his mistress, as well as the witness Gamesby. It may simply be that Bown wished to avoid the costs of the unwanted marriage. Yet, it also demonstrates that once the case was public knowledge, the interests of this particular craftsman and his circle were more aligned with his apprentice than with a servant who had been seduced under his roof. The witnesses had rounded on Barker, releasing Waryngton from his oath. The court duly concurred, the annulment was granted, and his master soon after hosted and witnessed Waryngton's marriage to one Margaret Foghler.[44] There were limits to household authority as a means of securing marriage. For Barker, however, this may not have represented a poor set of outcomes. She did not have to remain married to a man who demonstrably did not want to be married to her, and she did not lose all social footing, as her new position in the tailor's household shows. Perhaps taking the marriage through the courts even facilitated this.

Other householders pressured young people of their house to marry, and not necessarily out of a sense that it was the best outcome for sexual misbehaviour. Masters and mistresses had to consider their own reputations, and the importance of being seen to enforce a particular kind of religious morality. There were also more practical desires in play: moral-economic prerogatives of running an efficient household or business, and maintaining those in their employ. When Alice de Baumburght of York discovered Robert Peper and Agnes Besete in bed together in a high room of her house in 1381, she told Peper to plight his troth. He begged her to wait until morning; she retorted, 'By God, no. You'll do it now'.[45] Again, we see the difficulties of controlling behaviour within the household. De Baumburght claimed she went to some lengths to ensure the correct wording of Peper's promise, correcting him and insisting that he repeat after her. It appears she at least was aware that her authority alone would not be enough, nor was Peper's simple wording of

[44] Goldberg, *Women in England*, 117-18.
[45] Ibid.

'I will take you as my wife'. From this case, as with that of Margaret Barker, we can conclude that the intentions of servant women were not necessarily given as much weight as those of their sexual partners, either by employers or by the court, as it is the partners' language, actions, and interests that determine the validity of the contract. Yet we can complicate the picture here; the court of the Dean and Chapter specifically ask about Besete's response, which de Baumburght reports was that she 'considered herself satisfied', at which point she left the couple alone. For Besete, the pledge to marry was sufficient, either to stop her mistress' interventions or for the contract to be secure. She did not respond in kind with a formulaic statement of contract. This may have made Peper's legal case disputing the marriage stronger, but we cannot be sure of Besete's intentnions here.

Intra-household relationships appear in urban and church court records. 'Women's songs', however, simply do not deal with them. While 'serving men' might be an attractive prospect, no apprentice features as a sexual or romantic prospect, and in no lyric do the couple appear to live under the same roof.[46] This could reflect a set of ideals and realities from a range of perspectives. All who lived under the authority of a household could expect their sexual and/or romantic relationships to be at the goodwill of their employers. One can well imagine that the owners of the manuscripts examined in Chapter Three would not want to locate the sexual pleasure of their employees within the household. As we have seen here, such a situation was complicated, morally and financially. But perhaps the studied avoidance of literary representation of this kind of relationship in lyric also reflects a reality for singlewomen. It was better not to engage in intra-household sex, because the potential consequences weighed more heavily on women on short-term contracts than it did for their male counterparts.

What of servants who had relationships with men outside of their household? Agnes Eston's suit against John Crosby in 1494 bridged a class gap; she was likely of moderate status

[46] 'Off servyng men I wyll begyne', see above, Chapter Two, 143.

despite being in service, being the cousin of her employers, the Spencers. Crosby, however, was probably the son of an alderman. She alleged an exchange of vows that Crosby denied. Her employers, the Spencers, both appeared in court to support Eston's claim. It appears that the Spencers facilitated private access to their servant-relation. At this stage, it was in no way clear that the couple absolutely had a pre-contract in place. While this may have been expected, or even assumed, the Spencers certainly did not explicitly require it. Indeed, Thomas Spencer testified that Crosby 'went to Agnes' chamber and there they familiarly communicated with one another'.[47] He only confirmed that the couple saw themselves as married after the presumed consummation. At least one other witness interpreted their 'familiar communications' as implying sexual activity: Master William Dawbeney also testified that he was aware of their relationship and believed it to be sexual.[48]

While not all householders were so inclined to flexibility around sex, the Spencers were not alone in tolerating it as a step in the direction of marriage. In 1487, Beatrice Smyth, a servant to Elisabeth Abel, was reported to be fornicating with and wanting to marry one John Crote, servant to the rector of the parish church.[49] Abel directly asked Smyth about her intentions, discussed them with the rector, and enabled Smyth to care for Crote during a short sickness. The rector, however, was reported by more than one witness to have impeded the marriage, and made light of the prospect, saying 'That is a gay marriage, they be two fools, but better encumber one house than two'.[50] While this does imply that they ought to marry, it was said informally to Abel in the presence of a young singlewoman of the parish, Joan Mortymer, and seemingly in jest, as he later admitted to another couple of the parish that he was the only reason Smyth and Crote did

[47] CD, Agnes Eston c. John Crosby; For 'communication' as a euphemism, see MED communicacioun n. 2c) sexual intercourse.
[48] See ibid; This case is also significant for the history of women's literacy, as the three women witnesses are all recorded as being literate. See S. McSheffrey, 'Literacy and the Gender Gap in the Late Middle Ages: Women and Reading in Lollard Communities', *Women, the Book and the Godly*, eds. L. Smith and J. H. M. Taylor (Cambridge, 1995), 157-70, at 167.
[49] CD, Beatrice Smyth c. John Crote.
[50] Ibid.

not wed. Fornication and intent to marry was not sufficient, necessarily, to force a householder's hand in support of choice of marital partner.

On one occasion, the consistory court itself appears as a powerful tool in resisting household rejection of a marriage contract. It was part of the legal process that defendants had to admit or deny the allegations; in all the cases we have dealt with so far, the libel was indeed denied, and this was overwhelmingly the case for surviving records. But one extraordinary case required no answer; Richard Cressy and Alice Scrace appeared in an undisputed suit to confirm their marriage. Scrace, a servant, gave an extensive account of her relationship with Cressy, and detailed emotional and material support that grew into mutual affection (facilitated by fellow servants) and culminated in a contract made in her employers' house before leaving 'against their will'.[51] McSheffrey suggests that this case was brought to combat family hostility; only her master, however, is mentioned as impeding them.[52] Her mistress, on the other hand, gave Cressy private access to Scrace, again demonstrating that household authority was far from homogeneous and uncontested. Further, it was not only figures of authority who could manipulate the institution of the church court to effect an outcome. If Cressy gave a statement, it does not survive; instead, it is Scrace's voice that solely gives account for their relationship and decision-making. As such, it is her priorities and her understanding of the courtship that is foregrounded. Perhaps this was an issue of Scrace having reneged on a contract of service, where the couple could utilise the court to eclipse the breach of contract and their indiscretion in going over Scrace's master's head.

Structured, formal punishment was meted out to apprentice-men, or their masters might otherwise seek to exert control over outcomes of sexual misbehaviour. But the silence around the consequences for women, which we have to guess at from snatches of information, speaks to a lack of interest that may be ominous. In 1489, one Alice, servant of Edmund Nasshenden, was

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[51] CD, Richard Cressy c. Alice Scrace.

[52] Possibly because Richard was also helping Alice to recover her inheritance, which was withheld by her brother. If he had any objection to the marriage, however, it is not mentioned by Alice in her testimony, where she is frank about other questionable aspects such as their secrecy, use of go-betweens, clandestine marriage, and the objection of her employer.

reported to the visitation of the archdeaconry of Buckingham because she gave birth to a child and claimed she did not know the identity of the father. In place of a purgation, dismissal, or fine, the record simply states that 'She went away'.[53]

The short employment turnover and high mobility of servants in comparison to the years for training an apprentice meant that the kind of paternalism householders exerted over the latter was more committed and more focussed on rehabilitation than any concern over the former. Perhaps there was less record of punishment because transgressive women could simply be ejected from the household and their labour replaced. Singlewomen's sexuality was indeed policed - but without the kind of public and physical vigour with which male apprentices might have found themselves policed within guilds. Instead singlewomen were placed in a position of extreme fragility - and this was bound to shape their sexual experiences rather differently.

This is not to say that singlewomen did not face violence, but rather that it was unlikely to reach a court unless it caused serious injury. The central figure of *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day* faces a beating from her mistress when she returns home after her sexual encounter; and from a chance survival in the London Consistory we can see that sexual misdemeanour was likely to be met with unseen violence that was highly informal and spontaneous.[54] Alice Holton was subjected to physical punishment whilst in service with John Lucas. In a deposition for a matrimonial case before the London Consistory in 1489-90, Lucas admitted that he had hit Holton and called her a 'false harlot' because he viewed her as sexually suspect. He had sent her to buy food for his household one morning, and she did not return from that errand until about three o'clock in the afternoon; it was for this 'and not for any other reason' that he struck her[55] We will see, however, that this was not the inevitable outcome of sex for servants.

[53] Goldberg, *Women in England*, 123.
[54] 'Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day', ll. 41-4.
[55] CD, John Jenyn c. Alice Seton and John Grose.

There is reason to suspect Lucas' deposition. We might question why the court had asked about this physical and verbal assault at all; the case was not about her, but about acquaintances of Lucas. By piecing the proceedings together, we can see why Lucas brought Holton's sexuality to bear. In October 1489, she was called as a witness to a present exchange of contract between Alice Seton and John Jenyn. From this, we know a little about her. Aged twenty-five, she had worked as a servant for Lucas for over a year. She related that she heard the exchange and saw Jenyn give Seton a ring; Seton denied this.[56] Some months later, in March 1490, we come to a second round of witness statements, among them that of Lucas. In what is clearly a set of counter-statements designed to undermine Holton's original deposition, Lucas' violence and claim that she was a 'false harlot' takes on a rather different tenor. Potentially Holton felt too intimidated to return to the court; she was no longer in Lucas' employ at the time of the second set of hearings. In an apparent effort to save the validity of his statement, Lucas labels his ex-employee as sexually suspect. From this, we can understand two things. First, that an attack on a female witness' sexuality was a method to damage her reliability. Second, that hitting a woman servant for staying out too long was sufficiently valid for Lucas to feel free to use it as a justification in court.

In some cases, a master's violence could be catastrophic. A pregnant servant's position was all the more precarious, and nothing less than their survival could depend on the offer or withholding of shelter and care. In c. 1485, Alice, a servant, became pregnant by her master John de Man, a London pan-maker. When the pregnancy became apparent, Alice was 'expelled from his house'. She was readmitted shortly before the child was due, but it is unclear how she lived in the meantime, her master having withdrawn her shelter and maintenance once she was visibly pregnant. In a final and utter failure of household paternalism, de Man did not call a midwife. Both mother and child died in childbirth. This case may have only come to the attention of the civic

[56] CD, John Jenyn c. Alice Seton and John Grose; Anna Boeles Rowland has examined the consistory courts for evidence of gift-giving and its meaning in marriage suits. See her 'Material Mnemonics and Social Relationships in the Diocese of London, 1467-1524 (PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2017), 31-3; also E. R. Standley, *Trinkets and Charms: The Use, Meaning and Significance of Dress Accessories, AD 1300-1700* (Oxford, 2013), for the meaning of gifts in courtship.

authorities because there was concern that the child's burial place was unknown.[57] We are so rarely able to trace the aftermath of extra-marital pregnancy for servants, but this case throws into sharp relief that there was far more to fear than dismissal, and reminds us of the intersectional dimension of the dangers of childbirth.

These cases have served to show a grim reality. Women's domestic labour was cheap and replaceable; for some employers, this extended to the women themselves. However, we can also be attentive to alternative responses to reported misbehaviour. In March 1487, twenty-one men appeared before the York council chamber to attest to the good character of Elizabeth Ricardby, wife of Richard Panyerman. It is not clear what offence she was accused of, but the case evidently required a testimony of her career and sexual reputation before her marriage. She had lived thus:

> …with Richard Parke late of York decesid ffishmonger, and after his decese with Margrete his wife, by all the which tyme the said Elizabeth at all tymes was reputed an honest madyn, clene of body, true of hands and tong and in all things appertigneyng to hur womanhode a madyn of honest conversacion[58] and good disposicion…[59]
>
> […with Richard Parke, late of York, deceased, fishmonger, and after his death with Margaret his wife, and during all this time the said Elizabeth was at all times reputed an honest maiden, clean of body, true of [her] hands and tongue, and in all things appertaining to her womanhood, a maiden of honest conduct and good disposition…]

Whatever Ricardby was purported to have done, her defence reads as textbook avoidance of sex-related behaviours: she lived within a household; spoke cleanly; and acted in a manner beyond reproach. It seems there was a clear understanding of what an ideal singlewoman looked like, and these ideas could be used in a court setting to attempt a rehabilitation of a woman's character. The pristine testimony here could suggest that the allegations, whatever they were, were untrue; but this is almost to miss the point. The dominant discourse discussed in Chapter One permeated to

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[57] CLRO, Guildhall MS 9064/2, f. 115r: 'quae erat expulsa a domo sua & erga puerperi iterto recepta quae ob defectum mulierum moriebatur cum puero & nescitur vbi sepeliebatur', cited in P. C. Maddern, '"Oppressed by Utter Poverty": Survival Strategies for Single Mothers and Their Children in Late Medieval England', in *Experiences of Poverty in Late Medieval and Early Modern England and France*, ed. A. M. Scott (2nd ed., Abingdon, 2016), 41-62, at 52.

[58] MED conversacioun n. 1, Manner of living, conduct.

[59] *York House Books 1461-1490*, ii, 540.

the point that women were referred to by their apparent sexual conduct even when it was not at all clear that this was the aspect of their behaviour in question. As much as that conduct could be used to discredit them, a positive account of it could also provide support.

For some, rehabilitation of a kind could be achieved without institutional intervention. In the letter collection of the Plumpton family, around 1420, one letter concerns an unnamed servant whose extra-marital pregnancy prompts her master, William Wittcars, to try to place her in a new household. Wittcars wrote to Sir Robert Plumpton explaining that the child was by one of Plumpton's servants, and he had sheltered her during its infancy. He requests now that Plumpton be a 'good master' to her. The child, Wittcars suggested, would stay in his own household until he heard from Plumpton, presumably as to whether he would take in the child as well as the mother. Part of the recommendation reflects on what Wittcars considered to be the likely outcome had he not been a good master: 'she wold have rune her way' [she would have run away].[60] Thus, we gain glimpses of two perceived possibilities for servants who experienced extra-marital pregnancy: they might choose to flee if they feared censure; or, if given support, they might be helped to a new circumstance, perhaps even with their child.

When householders discovered sexual misbehaviour, their reaction was at least partly calculated to create distance between themselves and their dependants. This could have a range of manifestations, but the cases discussed here tend towards private or internal mechanisms of resolution and/or punishment as the first line of defence against sexual misbehaviour. A master might attempt to force an apprentice to marry, but launch legal action if they resisted. Violent punishment could be enacted publicly on a male apprentice through guild communities, or privately on a servant woman, only to appear in courts where undue force was used. This in itself suggests a degree of ambivalence about the appropriate arena and methods for policing women's behaviour. The gendered dynamics of punishment and visibility are connected to how women's

[60] *Plumpton Correspondence: A Series of Letters, Chiefly Domestick, Written in the Reign of Edward IV, Richard III, Henry VII, and Henry VIII*, ed. T. Stapleton (London, 1839), 109, Letter LXXXIII.

labour more generally was subject to far less explicit regulation and contract: there is no paper trail for the young women who were dismissed for sexual misbehaviour.

Understanding subjectivity requires knowledge of the context in which expressions are formulated. The potential for pleasure was one consideration in pursuing sexual encounters, but it was one among many, including the kinds of repercussions examined here. This tells us both about regulation, and about experience. Policing produced highly variegated responses. These at times confirmed the influence of normative views of the kind discussed in Chapter One, but their reception by both household heads and their servants was not passive. A tendency towards minimizing offences or performing 'damage control' is also discernible. What affected one member of a household had the potential to reflect poorly on all; through regulatory gestures, householders balanced their own reputations and interests with the subjectivities of those under their authority.

Friends and Neighbours

The role of the non-household witnesses in the cases in the previous section draw our attention to another group, beyond heads of the household, whose opinion mattered in making or undoing of sexual reputation. Whether men and women met in or out of doors, acquaintances and neighbours sought to determine whether behaviour was sexually suspect. Their testimonies help us to understand both where couples met, what constituted sex-related behaviour in these contexts, and the spectrum of potential community responses.

Couples were noticed by their neighbours and friends in contexts ranging from the fairly innocuous to explicitly sexual. When Robert Philipson sued Joan Corney to enforce a marriage contract in 1488, one witness remembered seeing the couple eating a fruit tart together in a field. The witness claimed that she incidentally needed to walk past them and heard their conversation as a result, in which Corney expressed nervousness about going much further than they already had without marrying: 'while it is so forward between us, I pray you let us be wedded, for I shall

have much anger specially with my dame'.[61] In the litigation that arose between Christian Hilles and Robert Padley before the London Consistory in 1490, Hilles claimed that Padley, one of her master's other servants, had made her pregnant. Witnesses attested to having seen the couple 'greatly in one another's company' and many times alone together during the summer months, 'turning the hay' in the meadows.[62] Beatrice Symth and John Crote, the couple above whose employers did not agree on whether or not they should marry, were reputed to be sexually involved, and one witness in their case recalled seeing Crote lead Symth 'to the house at the sign of the Coop in Stew Alley'.[63] The name of the street suggests it was a location for sex work; from this case it is clear that the houses there also provided rooms for fornicating couples. We see here the conditions under which people might meet, and how those who noticed them interpreted their behaviour. As in 'Women's songs' there are people seemingly "in the know" about meeting spots. The couples themselves might be regarded as one level of knowing – but there is an interpretative level, too. Just as the mistress in *Ladd y þe daunce a myssomur day* cautions that the speaker's dancing will 'in wel be sene', witnesses interpreted illicit semiotics.[64]

This may lead us to view social gatherings where lovers met in a slightly different light. Two people alone could be viewed as morally suspect; but a group could open more legitimate channels of communication. Margaret Partich testified that on 24 June 1486 in her home in the presence of friends, John Halyday attempted to make a promise of future marriage, which she refused.[65] John Brocher and Joan Cardif of Walthamstow were reported to have agreed to a marriage contract in the presence of friends at her home after a meal.[66] Margaret Flemmyng made a contract with Mark Patenson at the bedside of their mutual friend Alice Martyn during her lying-

[61] CD, Robert Philipson c. Joan Corney.
[62] CD, Christian Hilles c. Robert Padley; Turning or mowing hay is used as an innuendo in Middle Scots from at least 1540, for which see D. Lyndsay, *Ane satyre of the thrie Estaits, in commendation of vertew and vitvperation of vyce*, ed. F. Hall (London, 1869), ll. 690-694. See also case above of Barker and Waryngton, who are found together in a hay loft, 234.
[63] CD, Beatrice Smyth c. John Crote.
[64] See above, Chapter Two, 129.
[65] CD, John Halyday c. Margaret Partich.
[66] CD, John Brocher c. Joan Cardif alias Peryn.

in.[67] In this case, friends played a vital role in creating opportunities for the couple to express their feelings and intent. Agnes Agar testified that Flemmyng had asked her to go to Martyn and get her to 'move Mark to make a contract'.[68] Friends similarly provided the space for contract in the contested marriage suit of Agnes Whitingdon and John Ely. John Robert, a cheesemonger, sent his servant to Whitingdon's master's house to call her to his shop to meet Ely on the eve of a feast day. There, around nine o' clock, Robert's wife Joan asked how Whitingdon was faring – she responded that she was sad because she heard Ely had left her to pursue a widow. Robert contends that Ely then made a contract with the words: 'Agnes, by feith and my trouth, I forsake all women for you, and take you to my wif'. Whitingdon reciprocated, and this done they sat and drank together.[69] In an unchaperoned context, Whitingdon's explicit statement of interest could be taken as laxity. But in the presence of friends who orchestrated the meeting and encouraged her to speak, Whitingdon was absolved of any inappropriate behaviour.

In 1487, Agnes Waltham was in her Walthamstow home with John Gosnell and Richard Heth. Gosnell told Heth that 'it was publicly said in the parish that Richard too suspiciously frequented Agnes's house'. He pressured Heth to contract, suggesting that 'he would not have such frequent recourse to her unless he wished to have her as his wife'.[70] While this intervention does not make clear why Heth's presence in Waltham's home was inappropriate while Gosnell's was not, it does nonetheless demonstrate a kinder aspect to neighbours' surveillance. While communities could gossip, individuals showed interest in protecting how their friends were seen by wider society. Gosnell's prodding can be read as nosy – even misguided, given that Heth reneged on the contract – but perhaps also as platonic care, attempting to either avoid scandal, or resolve disapproval and confusion before it could reach the courts.

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[67] CD, Robert Walsh and Mark Patenson c. Margaret Flemmyng. An unusual place for a man to be present to make a contract; perhaps they could not find another witness.
[68] Ibid.
[69] CD, Agnes Whitingdon c. John Ely.
[70] CD, Agnes Waltham c. Richard Heth.

Another attempt at resolution before officially reporting comes in the case of Thomas Wulley and Margaret Isot in 1471, where family, neighbours, and even a constable dealt informally with the couple's reported fornication in Clerkenwell, London.[71] This case is particularly interesting because it appears that an informal resolution where the couple were caught in the act and made to exchange vows in front of witnesses, was enough for them to avoid the consistory court for almost two decades. In 1488 – seventeen years after the marriage was alleged to have taken place – Wulley sued Isot to enforce the contract. Isot denied it, and testified that she had been married in the intervening years to another man, John Heth.[72] Isot stated that she had married Heth some fourteen years ago. They had lived together for three years; in which time they had one child. Isot accused Heth of conspiring with Wulley to spread false reports about the nature of the latter's relationship with her. Whether this is true or not, it is evident that both men had not been active romantic presences in her life for more than a decade, and so the enforcement of the contract certainly seems pointed. Moreover, Isot was sufficiently resistant to Wulley making a claim on her to reveal that she was no longer living with her husband.

In reporting that an earlier contract had taken place, the witnesses in the 1488-9 case offer memories of escalating efforts to deter and then legitimise sexual misbehaviour. Wulley's parents were aware of the relationship; neighbours discussed how his mother had found him and Isot naked in a bed together in Isot's house, and took his shoes so that he would have to wear a pair of his lover's shoes. His father took a rather more direct approach, tipping off the local constable that the couple had been suspected by their neighbours of having a sexual relationship for about four months, and that night they might be found 'lying together' in one of their neighbour's houses, John Cracow. Wulley's father effectively mobilised his neighbours by making Wulley's misbehaviour public. On their being found half-dressed in Cracow's house by the constable and a

[71] CD, Thomas Wulley c. Margaret Isot and John Heth.
[72] No relation to Richard Heth above, although he could be the same John Heth who in 1495 was found guilty of spreading treasonous flyers in support of Perkin Warbeck, for which see S. McSheffrey, *Seeking Sanctuary: Crime, mercy, and politics in English courts, 1400-1550* (Oxford, 2017), 49.

number of men, Cracow claimed that they were married. The witness statements include further memories of the couple in disarray, struggling with knots and tangled armholes.

Here then, we see a range of responses to one couple, none of which are straightforward. While Wulley's parents both sought to deter their child, neither was willing to directly report him to the consistory court because they did not *want* him to marry Isot. Indeed, they were summoned in 1472 to answer a charge of impeding the marriage. Cracow, meanwhile, was willing to harbour the couple, and then cover for them (along with another neighbour) on discovery. Cracow's wife, Joan, reported that Isot and Wulley regularly came to the Cracows' house 'for the sake of drinking' only. It appears that each of the players here had a different threshold for acceptability, which might loosely be said to be the point where it was clear that neither partner was actively progressing their sexual relationship towards a marital contract. Their responses also vary, from gentle shaming through swapped footwear to out-and-out arrest.

Neighbours could further provide the route to restoration of reputation. When Joan Baron was accused of fornication in 1494, she appeared at the courts of the Archdeaconry of Buckingham to purge herself with her neighbours, Elizabeth Forster, Elina Godyngton, Alice Fuller, and Alice Pym.[73] In some cases, neighbours were the last resort for women who had nowhere else to go, giving safety, and perhaps solace, even at the risk of their own reputations. In St Peter-le-Bailey, Oxford, one Widow Colls was known to receive pregnant women in her home and care for them. She was reported in a visitation of 1530, but her apparent repeat 'offence' of providing shelter to pregnant women demonstrates that as well as being the sources of accusation, neighbours could try to shield each other from the worst of social censure and the resulting dangers.[74]

Medieval communities were not characterised by blanket moral surveillance – and this is of a piece with the dappled picture we have seen in previous chapters. Once a potential act or

[73] Goldberg, *Women in England*, 123.
[74] Ibid, 122; For the offence of harbouring, see R. H. Helmholz, 'Harboring Sexual Offenders: Ecclesiastical Courts and Controlling Misbehaviour', *Journal of British Studies* 37:3 (1998), 258-268.

relationship was alleged, people could choose how to respond. Their choices could take a variety of forms, depending on: their own relationship to those involved; whether the misbehaviour was publicly known; and more than anything, their own ideas about what was acceptable. Householders sought to control sexual relationships under their roof as a mark of authority and as a reflection on their own moral standing. Young men might want to talk about their sexual encounters, but not face punishment for it. Neighbours could be affronted by, or sympathetic to, their neighbours' encounters. In a sense, these findings confirm the sexual agency of singlewomen, but also the punitive environment that could arise through any exercise of sexuality outside marriage. I have demonstrated here that responses to misbehaviour fit within a wider schema of informal resolution that only appears in the records when these resolutions failed.

GENDER AND REPUTE

Barbara Hanawalt's work has traced the interweaving ties that made up social networks.[75] Perceptions and practices overlapped in the daily reproduction of local relations, in the family and household, but also through the wider community. Proceedings reveal the roles of households and communities in categorizing and interpreting each other's conduct, and the efforts of plaintiffs and deponents to shape these processes. We are mindful that our evidence can only come from where disputes have escalated to institutional involvement. Here, close readings of five cases demonstrate the ways in which sexual reputation, both of the self and of others, might be fashioned in and outside of the courts. In this section, I focus on how women framed their decision-making around sex and relationships, accounting for their repute and their actions, and how courts responded.

In October 1491, Elizabeth Brown sued Laurence Gilis for breach of contract.[76] Her claim was asserted upon hearing that Gilis had entered a contract with another woman, Marion Lauson.

[75] B. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986), 118-19.
[76] CD, Elizabeth Brown and Marion Lauson c. Laurence Gilis.

She offered two witnesses to this contract, and a further witness to their precontract. While Lauson provided witnesses for her exchange of vows, this was null unless Brown's witnesses could be discredited. As such, from the earliest stages this case was overwhelmingly focused on the lifestyles and reputations of the witnesses for both plaintiffs. An extraordinary number of depositions were collected. More than half were produced in an effort to determine whose witnesses were the more credible, as opposed to establishing the veracity of the alleged contracts.

Shannon McSheffrey has examined this case in detail, and provides context for the social status of Brown and Lauson. Brown likely lived in relative poverty in the hospital of St Katherine by the Tower, a precinct with a reputation for sex work and crime. Lauson lived within the City, in her own house.[77] McSheffrey focuses on the challenges to men's honesty and *fama* in this case, which indeed is the dominant theme in the vast majority of the depositions, as 22 out of the 23 witnesses were men. Indeed, most of the witnesses do not even know the plaintiffs, but rather talk about each other.[78] Here, however, I want to focus on how the reputation of the one woman-witness was handled.

Despite attacks on the characters of every other central player in this case, Lauson was repeatedly called 'honest' and no efforts were made to undercut her reputation. In contrast, one witness said Brown was 'a woman of dishonest and evil conversation with diverse men', and others expressed interest in Lauson succeeding in her suit because she was 'the woman of better opinion and fame'.[79] Evidently the difference in these women's social standing worked in Lauson's favour, where Brown's social position and location made her more vulnerable to accusations of laxity. Yet Brown's witness, Margaret Smyth, experienced a far more thorough lambasting of her character.

Smyth introduces herself as a Welsh widow recently moved from Kent. However one of Lauson's witnesses offers a fuller history for Smyth. During a stint as a tapster, Smyth was allegedly

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[77] S. McSheffrey, 'Liberties of London: Social Networks, Sexual Disorder, and Independent Jurisdiction in the Late Medieval Metropolis', *Crossing Borders: Boundaries and Margins in Medieval and Early Modern Britain*, eds. K. J. Kesselring and S. Butler (Leiden, 2018), 216-36, at 224-225.
[78] Ibid, 226.
[79] CD, Elizabeth Brown and Marion Lauson c. Laurence Gilis.

known as an adulteress and sex worker, forced to move out of the ward of Langbourn and into St. Katherine's, where she married, 'fostering lechery and committing adultery'. The witness remembers that during the forced removal of 'bawds and prostitutes' at the order of the Queen on 24 August 1491, Smyth was expelled from the precinct and sheltered with a bawd. The following weeks saw her expelled twice more from different wards for having sex with 'diverse men'. The testimony culminates with the claim that 'she would customarily sing as a prostitute, and sang scurrilous songs instigating others to lust and uncleanness against good customs, in this witness's hearing'.[80]

Two points here expose weaknesses in Smyth's own testimony. First, although she claimed to live in London for only half a year (and in a more reputable precinct than St. Katherine's), she claims to have known the plaintiff and defendant for years. This suggests that she had indeed regularly moved around several adjoining areas. Second, she testifies that Brown and Gilis' precontract took place in her home and in her presence on 27 August. This is three days after Lauson's witness above claimed Smyth was expelled from St. Katherine's. Smyth does not reappear in the later depositions, and so it might be surmised that she was dismissed as a credible witness. While we cannot untangle how much of each testimony reflects her actual situation, we can draw some conclusions from Smyth's role and treatment in this case. Brown's precontract took place in front of Smyth and another woman, one Margaret Chyrke, whom McSheffrey has identified as regularly appearing in disciplinaries against the east London sex trade.[81] Indeed, Smyth mentioned her friend was 'in the Counter' at the time of her deposition, a prison where sex workers were held. Together they encouraged the couple to make a contract which Brown, at least, thought could hold against the scrutiny of the church court. The existence of women on the literal periphery of London society, residing just within or without the boundary of the City, enabled the men they interacted with to make a series of assumptions not just about their sexual status, but

[80] CD, Elizabeth Brown and Marion Lauson c. Laurence Gilis.
[81] Ibid.

also their lives and experiences. The character assassination of Smyth follows a series of tropes that we have seen throughout this thesis. In an echo of the Mary Magdalen plays, she moves from tapster to adulteress.[82] Like the speaker of *Þis enper day I mete a clerke*, she seems to lie about her whereabouts and history.[83] Lastly, a witness seals her reputation with a rare piece of legal evidence for women singing bawdy songs.

A contested marriage suit by Agnes Brignell against John Herford in 1432 demonstrates awareness by both parties of the ways in which women's testimonies might be manipulated.[84] John Jameson, a twenty-four-year-old servant, was standing in his master's doorway when Brignell came up to him after dark and asked him to accompany her to John Herford's rooms. There, she asked Herford to recount his promise to marry her. His response was evasive: he said he had no intention to have any other woman, and besides which, had he not already given her the security of an oath before witnesses? Brignell's response is illuminating: 'these witnesses were merely women', so she had brought John Jameson. Jameson's own statement ends with the couple exchanging present words of consent, before leaving for Brignell's home where he said he knew they had sex, because Herford said they were going to, and Brignell talked about it afterwards. Indeed, most of the evidence for the plaintiff consisted of her being found in bed with Herford at various stages. But Brignell recognised that a contract in the presence of women, even accompanied by a well-attested sexual relationship, had the potential to be deemed no contract at all by her neighbours or a court, and took pains to ensure that her marriage was properly witnessed – by a man.

Less than two months later, however, Herford brought a counter-suit to dispute the contract on two grounds.[85] The first was that he was not in the city of York at the time that Brignell alleged the contract to have taken place, with multiple witnesses attesting to his being in Pontefract. This on its own could have perhaps been enough, but Herford also chose to lambast the sexual

[82] Chapter One, 51.
[83] Chapter Two, 134.
[84] Goldberg, *Women in England*, 115-116.
[85] Ibid, 116-117.

reputation of Brignell's women witnesses. The first was her sister, Isabel Henryson, with whom Brignell lived. Isabel was over thirty, apparently unmarried, but 'well known' for having three or four children by a married man.[86] Brignell's second witness was Katherine Burton, who was not a member of their household but certainly there often enough at night according to her own statement. Herford's witness said that Burton was known for her relationship with a singing priest. She:

> […] was and is still of ill repute and low standing in that according to common talk of others one Sir John Webster, vicar choral of the cathedral church of York, and several other chaplains and married and unmarried men knew her carnally in the embrace of adultery and fornication.[87]

Herford does not even try to undermine John Jameson as a witness; it seems the case was sufficiently derailed by demonstrating that Brignell lived and associated with women of ill repute. Yet, for all its misogyny, we do gain a glimpse from this case of three women who were sexually active outside of marriage, without apparent formal consequence, until Agnes sought a marriage. Only then did their reputations become relevant.

A contested marriage case that arose between Alice Parker and Richard Tenwinter in London in 1488 initially appears to reveal a young woman's anxiety to conceal pre-marital sexual activity. The case, brought by Parker, is worth examining in detail. Tenwinter testified that when he asked to lodge in her room all night, Parker responded that she dare not allow him because she feared them being seen by the early-rising butchers in her street or tenement.[88] Tenwinter places the words in Parker's mouth in his deposition, and while he may be accurately reporting her speech, we must also consider that it helps his defence to do so. If we start from here, then Tenwinter was

[86] Philippa Maddern has collated 302 cases of illegitimate children and their household situations 1350-1500. This could include short-term wardships or boarding arrangements, but also underage marriage. 33.7% of the mothers were servants. P. Maddern 'Between Households: Children in Blended and Transitional Households in Late-Medieval England', *The Journal of Childhood and Youth* 3:1 (2010), 65-86.
[87] Women in England, 116.
[88] CD, Alice Parker c. Richard Tenwinter.

aware of the problem of surveillance, but also that reporting it as Parker's speech presents her as allowing him entry *knowing* how it would look to her neighbours.[89]

Yet not all neighbours were created equal: Tenwinter also entered Alice's chamber in front of a witness, Robert Adcock. Adcock was a friend of Tenwinter, and twenty-three years old, so we might presume approximately the same age as the deponent. He was from St. Nicholas Shambles in London, the location of Butcher Hall Lane, so it is likely that they were neighbours, given the concern about nosy butchers. Parker/Tenwinter's concern about surveillance thus demonstrates a distinction, whether rightly or wrongly, between older men in an established profession who might be more likely to condemn or publicly castigate her, and a young man who came to her home late at night to support his friend in seeking a sexual partner.

Once the case was made public by Parker bringing it to court, Tenwinter's defence relied completely on attacking Parker's sexual reputation. Tenwinter said that Alice 'repeatedly urged [him] that he should come to her house and led him to her chamber'. When he agreed, she asked if they would wed, to which he responded 'I w[ill] wedde you as wel as I can'. The statement continued that by this he meant 'meaning that he would know her carnally, and thus this witness slept that night with her in the chamber and since then and he frequently knew her carnally'.[90] Meanwhile, Adcock said Tenwinter entered her chamber, and adjusted the phrasing, attributing the following words to Parker: 'If ye wil make me as good a woman as ye be man, ye shall lye wt me'.[91] Evidently Parker relied on Adcock to demonstrate that this was a case of consent to sex with the intention of marriage, not simply fornication. But both Adcock and Tenwinter placed emphasis on Parker's willingness, even coaxing, for Tenwinter to come to her home and enter her room. Both, then, sought to present Parker as a woman of suspect virtue, who understood the

[89] This awareness of a lack of privacy is reflected in pleas from the rolls of the London Assize of Nuisance, where plaintiffs brought complaints of being overlooked through badly placed windows. For example, see CLRO CLA/040/02/001, m. 2, for Richard de Chigwell's 1301-2 case against Geoffrey de Conduit and Imanya de Brauncastre.
[90] CD, Alice Parker c. Richard Tenwinter.
[91] Ibid.

arrangement she was entering. It is clear that these men could move between registers of sexuality: to Parker on her doorstep, they present illicit sex as desirable; in the consistory court, Tenwinter had recourse to the trope of the libidinous woman who pursues men to her own ruin, even if Adcock mitigates his narrative somewhat.

Where this case has been treated elsewhere, it has been analysed as an attempt by Parker to manipulate Tenwinter into marriage.[92] But the vagueness of the allegedly contractual words would require Parker, a woman who seemingly lived alone in a business quarter, to have been exceptionally naive. It does not seem safe to base this reading on her being the plaintiff. As we have seen, there were reasons beyond desire to marry to bring a case like this. If Parker was as overlooked by her neighbours as Tenwinter suggested, then whisperings and public pressure may have contributed to her decision to profess publicly that she believed a contract had been made and seek redress in the Consistory, as this was surely the more forgivable version of events.

Just as Tenwinter glossed his own words as amounting to less than a precontract, the potential to manipulate proceedings by casting doubt over whether or not marital consent was in earnest was also used by women. The case of John Brocher of Enfield against Joan Cardif of Walthamstow brought an unusually large number of witnesses, all of whom attested to having seen or heard signs that they were married, and that their marriage was commonly known. John Miller, Cardif's stepfather, claimed that she had cooked for Brocher, that over the meal they had discussed his debts, and that she had agreed to pay his creditors forty shillings to free him from his obligations.[93] Cardif was a widow, and was to some extent in charge of her own assets and affairs. In return Brocher gave her a girdle decorated with silver. In an intimate moment that echoes the couple's exchanges in *Al þis day ic han souȝt*, Cardif's stepfather saw Brocher give her a kerchief which 'she gratefully accepted from him, kissing him and tying the kerchief around her neck'.[94]

[92] McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture*, 70-1.
[93] CD, John Brocher c. Joan Cardif alias Peryn.
[94] Ibid; 'Al þis day ic han souȝt', l. 14.

Despite evidence from multiple witnesses, no one seemed to be in a position to force Cardif to fulfil the alleged contract despite her apparent encouragement, acceptance of gifts, and physical closeness with the plaintiff. Both her stepfather and mother said they want her to keep 'her faith', while another witness suggested that the stepfather had solicited the match, and their marriage is commonly held in their parish to have taken place.[95] Her godfather said 'he does not want her to win this case because of the danger for her soul, but he desires that justice be done between them', an ambivalent statement which suggests there may have been good cause for Cardif to seek release. Her stepfather John Miller recalled her delaying making the contract with the words 'I will not pli3t you faith and trouth till after Ester, that I cover [it] before my moder', even though there was no need given her widowed status. There could be a number of reasons for this delay – perhaps she did indeed feel pressured by her stepfather's manoeuvres to arrange the match and further prompts to fulfil her promise.

In cases where women invoke their elders to delay marriage, previous treatments have argued that this demonstrates a widely accepted dynamic of medieval society that men were more independent in their marital decision-making. For McSheffrey, invocation of a parent or employer by a woman faced with a marriage proposal 'should not surprise us, knowing what we do about gender and medieval society'.[96] However, Cardif's case shows us that this delay could be strategic: one tool in a series of gestures that amounted to both looking after one's own interests, and at times one's physical safety, as well as rejecting advances in language that was hard to counter. The key piece of evidence is that this is not the only method that Cardif employed: she also was reported to have confided in her godfather 'at the time of the contract' that 'she did not think in her heart the words her mouth spoke'.[97] To suggest that her will did not match her words was a

[95] CD, John Brocher c. Joan Cardif alias Peryn.
[96] S. McSheffrey, "'I will never have none ayenst my fader's will": Consent and the Making of Marriage in the Late Medieval Diocese of London', in *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom: Essays in Memory of Michael M. Sheehan, C.S.B*, eds. C. M. Rousseau et al. (Kalamazoo, 1998), 163-174. at 160.
[97] CD, John Brocher c. Joan Cardif alias Peryn.

clever argument, as no one could sufficiently answer it: only Cardif could speak for her intent, regardless of how others interpreted her actions.[98]

One more case serves to show that sexual reputation was not only weaponised against women: they might also use it against men. Elizabeth Croft was harassed for a sustained period by one Herbert Rowland in January 1494.[99] Croft described Rowland throwing 4d. at her when she refused to discuss contracting marriage with him. This would suggest they were in an alehouse, a context which features heavily in the lyrics where women reject unwanted suitors.[100] She said he had paid too much; he responded that he would come back and 'drink up the rest of the value'. On this pretext, he sought her out again, called her a debtor and insisted she come and drink with him to the value of the money he had left before. For the next five or six days, he came daily to her house and said he was 'fixed' on having her as his wife. She reports that she told him 'that he had a foolish mind if he fixed it on her, whose feelings he did not know'. This directness has echoes in another case, that of John Jarard and Joan Nele, in which Joan responded to John's profession of love by saying 'Ye be but a child to love there as ye be not loved again'.[101] Croft's tactic for getting him to leave, as with Joan Cardif, was to say that any suitor would have to obtain her master's consent. This worked – for a time.

Three days later Rowland returned with two men, and told Croft that he did not have her master's consent. She said that he would never have her consent either, demonstrating that faced with threat, Croft exerted her own will. Croft then related to the court in detail how, now that she had clearly stated her stance, Rowland moved from wheedling to intimidation:

> And then Herbert said that he never wished to have any other woman as his wife except this witness. And the men who came with him urged this witness to say those words to them, and this the witness refused to do, until finally, as they insistently urged her, holding

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98 Intent is also important in CD, Thomas Philpott c. Margaret Frowyke, in which Margaret claims to have exchanged gifts 'for the sake of being friendly'. See a similar defence in CD Francis [Unknown] c. Elizabeth Clerk.

99 CD, Herbert Rowland c. Elizabeth Croft, Margaret Hordley.

100 See above, Chapter Two, 151-4. Drinking and alehouses also appears in multiple other cases in the consistory, see for example Alice Billingham c. John (or Thomas) Wellis.

101 CD, John Jarard c. Joan Nele alias Fysshe.

> this witness so that she could not leave them and saying that they would not leave her unless first some consolatory words were said to Herbert, this witness wishing in part to satisfy their insistence, said to them, 'If that you can get my Maisters good wil, ye shal have myn'.[102]

In producing a narrative of events, Croft is engaging in legal fiction. This is not to say that her account was not true, but that she was creating a narrative that was shaped carefully in order to demonstrate that Rowland and his friends' actions rendered her the wronged party.

The picture is complicated by the statements of Rowland's 'witnesses'. John Bedyll and William Tommys both testified that Croft had agreed to marry Rowland, but had afterwards quarrelled with her sister who alleged precontract with Rowland herself. On the threat that Croft's sister and their master (evidently they were employed in the same house) would forsake her, Bedyll and Tommys alleged that Croft reneged on the contract.[103] McSheffrey concludes from this statement that Croft did indeed 'give in and married Rowland without her employer's knowledge'.[104]

The court, however, was not convinced: having received these conflicting statements, Croft was sequestered in her home pending judgement. But Rowland continued to harass her from the street by standing by her door and boasting that he was the head of the household. Her employer, William Bankis, admitted to breaking Croft's sequestration in order to protect her from Rowland's public intimidation project.[105] It appears she was then moved to the house of a proctor of the court for the remainder. By May, Croft had launched a counter-suit. She produced evidence that Rowland had previously reneged on another marriage contract altogether. He had been discovered in the home of Margaret Hordley at ten o' clock 'suspiciously alone together'. He had

[102] CD, Herbert Rowland c. Elizabeth Croft, Margaret Hordley.
[103] Ibid.
[104] McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture*, 92. In an earlier discussion of this case, she also says of Croft that 'her actions caused considerable ire'. See McSheffrey, 'Consent and the Making of Marriage', 166.
[105] CD, Herbert Rowland c. Elizabeth Croft, Margaret Hordley.

avoided their being brought before the ecclesiastical court at that time by claiming he had contracted marriage, but when the banns were to be issued, he prevented this too.[106]

Croft's attack was two-pronged. Having discredited Rowland with two male witnesses to his previous contract, she turned to Rowland's own violent witnesses. One of the Consistory court's own registrars was called as witness to Tommys' own case of adultery 'with divers women, and especially with a certain Joan his servant, whom he admitted he had impregnated' not even a year previously. He had paid a fine to avoid public penance, which was confirmed by the commissary who had received it, Master Richard Blodywell.[107] Only a month after Croft's countersuit, Blodywell himself was brought to the court over a heated dispute among its functionaries, during which he was reported to have insulted another master, saying 'I wull call the Master whan I call the keper of my hoors'.[108] And these were the men to be trusted on their oaths?[109] Perhaps she never wanted to marry the man who seems to have been her lover. As with all others, we do not know how this case ended, but Croft's case demonstrates that women, too, could use men's loose sexuality against them to undermine their trustworthiness in court. To get to this point, she had endured months of harassment, intimidation, and at the end of it all, her reputation is still likely to have suffered as a result. Yet, Croft was proactive: she repeatedly and unambiguously stated the importance of her own feelings, and spoke up for herself.

Contested marriages show us that communities were watching each other. People in extra-marital relationships sought to avoid the public eye, and women's battle for their reputation was relentless, and often unwinnable. But sexual partners could also quickly change registers from mutually understood signals and language of sexual availability, to the dominant discourse that was most likely to achieve the outcome they wanted once discovered. Young men could claim that

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106 CD, Herbert Rowland c. Elizabeth Croft, Margaret Hordley.
107 Ibid; DL/C/B/043/MS09064/005, fol. 142r confirms this case.
108 LMA, MS DL/C/A/001/MS09065, 210rv.
109 Shannon McSheffrey has noted the weaponization of men's sexual reputation in other cases, for which see her Men and Masculinity in Late Medieval London Civic Culture: Governance, Patriarchy and Reputation', *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities*, ed. J. Murray (New York, 1999), 243-278, at 261-3.

their partner was insatiable to avoid marriage; young women could claim they had only agreed on the consent of the parents, or that they understood themselves to be married (or soon to be) to avoid public censure. Once a reputation for sexual laxity was 'commonly known', women were less likely to get a fair hearing. Further, these women might find themselves pulled towards the margins of society where dangers were all the greater. Here, for the most part, they drop from our view altogether.

WOMEN AND THE CLERGY

In 1487, the home of Agnes Wilson in Staines, Middlesex, was stormed by three men of the parish at four o' clock in the morning, when they suspected her of fornication with a cleric.[110] They apprehended Richard Wodehous and brought him before the authorities. A week or two later, Wilson herself was called to give a statement. The men were known to her; she admitted that Wodehous had been in her home from around midnight up until the time he was dragged out, but claimed that they had been gossiping only, and in the presence of her adolescent sons until she showed him upstairs to look at a chest belonging to her late husband. It was presumably here, in her chambers, that the local men found them. While Wilson's male neighbours condemned her, the judge concluded that her purgation should rest on 'seven of her honest women neighbours'.[111] The case of Agnes Wilson draws our attention to how communities saw holy orders as no impediment to being sexually active or threatening. A striking number of 'Women's songs' name priests as lovers. Here, I intend to explore the realities for women who were found to have had sexual contact with priests.

I am concerned particularly with the potential for women consensually to enter sexual relationships with clergy. However, in order properly to situate these relationships in their social context and power dynamics, I turn first to accusations of sexual violence that involved clergy. In

[110] On segmented sleep cycles, A. R. Ekirch, *At Day's Close: Night in times past* (New York, 2005).
[111] CD, Office c. Sir Richard Wodehous and Agnes Wilson.

Chapter One, we unpacked modern scholarship that sought to absolve a fictive priest of his propensity for sexual coercion.[112] Here, we briefly examine their absolution by their communities.

It has been observed that the clergy were accused of ravishment more than any other group, and more likely to be prosecuted. Philippa Maddern's study of King's Bench cases between 1422-42 in East Anglia found that thirty-seven clerics appear among the 216 defendants – a high proportion against the layman population.[113] Dunn similarly finds that the clergy were substantially over-represented among alleged perpetrators, but makes the distinction that few of those accused were bishops (with a few notable exceptions) or higher. While the unbeneficed figure more highly than the beneficed, Dunn sees this as reflective of the clerical population generally.[114] As we well know, fifteenth-century juries preferred acquitting to convicting in the case of felonies.[115] The difference, of course, with a priest is that he could claim benefit of clergy, and thus would not receive a death sentence. We need not view the comparatively few cases involving laymen as evidence that the priests were specifically targeted; rather, it can reasonably be argued that the benefit of clergy meant that a guilty sentence did not carry quite the same weight and was as such more likely to be reached by juries.[116]

Witness the case of Petronilla Flyntard on 5 October 1433. The perpetrator, the rector of St Mary Endgate, Beccles, was twice bailed. He had been rector since 1401, and the delay may well suggest that the jury were reluctant to try someone who had clearly been central to the community for a long time. On his third appearance, however, he was pronounced guilty, duly proved his clergy, and was delivered to the bishop.[117] Evidently even a guilty sentence did not spell the end of a priest's career; in this case, he returned to Endgate and remained its rector until 1453. If not

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[112] See above, Chapter One, 78.
[113] P. C. Maddern, *Violence and Social Order: East Anglia 1422-1442* (Oxford, 1992), 102.
[114] Dunn, *Stolen Women*, 180-1.
[115] J. G. Bellamy, *Crime and Public Order in England in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1973), 156-61.
[116] Caroline Dunn has further suggested that benefit of clergy would have been an incentive for men accused of rape to claim clerical status. See her *Stolen Women*, 181.
[117] R. L. Storey, 'Malicious Indictments of Clergy in the Fifteenth Century', in *Medieval Ecclesiastical Studies in Honour of Dorothy M. Owen*, eds. M. J. Franklin and C. Harper-Bill (Woodbridge, 1995), 221-40, at 228; Note that Storey attempts to cast doubt on the fitness of the jury on this third occasion.

returned to his own parish, a repeat offender could still pursue a career in the church. The clerk found guilty of attacking Katherine Sokerman of Mildenhall on 22 February 1432 and another unnamed woman reappeared in at the Suffolk gaol where he was held four years later, but this time as the bishop's commissary to claim convicted clerks. By 1443, he was rector of Easton.[118]

It is worth noting that all the women in the above cases are married women. This may be indicative of the perceived higher stakes of accusations about married women, due to the implications for paternity. It would take a larger study than this to ascertain just how often accusations were made by singlewomen. How far did their accusations get? Would they have had the same kind of access to courts? In 1492, Margaret Bond, a servant, brought a case of attempted sexual assault before London's Commissary Court:

> Sir Simon, parish priest, in the same place [Parish of St Nicholas Acon] tried with all his might to rape Margaret Bond the servant of John Feld, and to that end because she did not consent to him, he wanted to suffocate her with her kerchief, as is clear from the marks remaining on her neck. On 8 December, the said Simon appeared, and after a discussion between the said woman and himself, the master [of the court] warned Simon to go, to appear before him on Monday, and also the master suspended him from the celebration of mass in the interim; and he denied the charge and said he would purge himself with five witnesses on the next Friday. On that day he appeared with his compurgators, viz. Sir John Pyne, Sir John Walran, Sir John Malen, and Sir William Glover, priests, and the master presiding declared him to be legitimately purged, and he was dismissed.[119]

The physical signs of this attack led to his discovery. Without this, it seems reasonable to suggest that such attacks could go undiscovered, and undisclosed by the servants who endured them. And

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[118] Storey, 'Malicious Indictments of Clergy', 235-6.

[119] [Dominus simon presbiter parochialis ibidem conabatur se in quantum potuit, Margaretam Bond servientem cum Johanne Feld eam rapuisse, et pro eo quod noluit in eum consentire, voluit eam suffocasse cum suo flammiolo, prout liquet per vestigia in collo suo remanentia. viii die Decembris, dictus Dominus Simon comparuit, et post communicacionem habitam inter dictam mulierem et ipsum, dominus monuit eundem dominum Simonem, ad comparendum coram eo, die Lune proximo, et eciam dominus interim suspendidit eum a celebracione divinorum; et negavit articulum, et purgare se v manu, die Veneris proximo; illo die comparuit cum purgatoribus suis, viz. M. Johanne Pyne, M. Johanne Walran, domino Johanne Malen, et domino Willielmo Glover, presbiteris, et dominus presidens declaravit eundem legitime purgatum, et dimittitur]. *A series of precedents and proceedings in criminal causes extending from the year 1475 to 1640, extracted from act-books of ecclesiastical courts in the diocese of London, illustrative of the discipline of the Church of England*, ed. W. H. Hale (London, 1847), 33; my translation.

little wonder, given that even the physical evidence in Bond's case did not lead to any consequences for her attacker.

It is clear that everyone understood exactly what had occurred. It was not that the narrative was indeterminate, and the meaning had yet to be decided by the community or by the court. It is almost the reverse. The function of the compurgation here was to render indeterminate or indeed irrelevant what happened; and from that position to re-establish the reputation of the accused priest. The judicial process here was not aiming to establish whether or not to believe the servant and her master, but whether to change the community's view of a priest as a result. Perhaps, unofficially, it did; while this priest faced no institutional repercussion, it is plausible to think that the incident could have contributed to a poor reputation within his parish.

We will not dwell here, but Bond's case was simultaneously unusual in that it reached the courts at all, and painfully predictable in the violence it illustrates, both of her attacker, and the church community in its collusion. Yet, that Bond reported at all tells us that violence is not the totality of the landscape, as she was able to refuse her attacker's advances, even if he did not listen. She could further recognise that what occurred was wrong in the aftermath and speak it, even if she was not heard. It is from here that we can begin to consider relationships with priests that were complex, and potentially consensual. Next, I examine cases that appeared in ecclesiastical courts and visitation records in order better to understand what women might have expected or stood to gain from a range of relationships with priests, and why they appear more frequently in both church courts and 'Women's songs'.

Recently, historians have begun to rework our understanding of how priests viewed themselves and their sexuality, and it is worth starting here to get a sense of whether women too may have viewed churchmen as distinct from laymen. Jennifer D. Thibodeaux calls attention to the variation among clerical masculinities, and points to the differences of both norms and

practices between friars, priests, bishops, and clerics of lower orders.[120] Janelle Werner offers a further way in; she has suggested that priests 'often behaved like laymen' and frequently engaged in sexual relationships.[121] In her study of the diocese of Hereford using the 1397 episcopal visitation records, she found that 67 secular priests, roughly 14 per cent of the clerical population, were named in sexual misconduct cases, and that one in four parishes had a reported incontinent priest. There were a further ten regular clergy, most of whom were accused of fornication rather than concubinage – that is, sexual relationships that did not involve maintenance.[122] In the cases of both laymen and secular clerics – but not monks – just under a third of charges targeted ongoing relationships. This leads Werner to conclude that clerical and lay sexual misconduct operated along similar lines, albeit at different levels.

Patricia Cullum observed that secular clergy were perhaps more likely to be presented as susceptible to illicit sexuality than monks, due to their greater proximity to and involvement in the lay world. Certainly, in the most practical terms, women who were attracted to secular clergy had more opportunities to be alone with them than monks or laymen. Cullum also notes the technical age difference in ordination between monks and secular clergy – eighteen for the former, and twenty-four in the latter case. She posits that this meant secular clergy would have formed their gender identity alongside their lay counterparts and may have identified more closely with lay definitions of manliness than enclosed priests (canons or monks in clerical orders).[123] Michelle Armstrong-Partida has made a related case for Catalunya through analysis of early fourteenth-century parish visitation records, court records, and episcopal registers. She argues that parish priests fashioned an identity that 'adopted hegemonic patterns of masculinity in late medieval

120 See *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks, and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. D. Thibodeaux (Basingstoke, 2010).
121 Werner, 'Promiscuous Priests and Vicarage Children', 162.
122 Ibid, 165.
123 P. Cullum, 'Clergy, Masculinity, and Transgression in Late Medieval England', *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. D. Hadley (Abingdon, 1998), 178-196, at 178-83.

society, functioned best in a parochial setting, and promoted their status and authority as priests'.[124] Given this context, it is perhaps reasonable to expect that secular clergy were more likely to be sexually incontinent.

Occasionally we can see the tensions that Cullum draws our attention to in cases where an illicit relationship has begun before or around the time of profession. Pederson gives a detailed account of the case of Agnes Huntingdon and Simon Monkton's relationship, which began lovingly but descended into physical and financial abuse in the years following their marriage. Agnes had dealings with the ecclesiastical court in York on a previous occasion owing to an alleged marriage contract that her parents successfully rejected. Despite this earlier relationship, which was reported to have been widely known and included physical contact, Agnes was able to secure a second contract with Simon. Here, however, there was an impediment of another kind. Simon's father wanted him to become a priest. One witness reported Agnes responding thus:

> Simon, I understood that your father wants to make you enter religion and this cannot happen because you know well we are engaged to each other and I want to have you and no one else as my man.[125]

Another witness recalled the same speech as including a vow that if he joined the church, she would 'call [him] back from it'. While Agnes successfully persuaded Simon not to join the clergy, this was a crossroads faced by other couples who responded differently. In the visitations of the Hereford diocese in 1397, one Richard Stokke, 'recently promoted to holy orders', was reported at Forest, Dymock, to be living with Isabel Waren, 'with whom he made a contract before taking this ordination'.[126] He claimed that the marriage had not been solemnised; we can see the resonance with Simon and Agnes, who had likewise contracted but not yet married. Yet their relationships appear in regulatory records in very different circumstances. The evidence of Agnes' pursuit of

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[124] M. Armstrong-Partida, *Defiant Priests: Domestic Unions, Violence, and Clerical Masculinity in Fourteenth-Century Catalunya* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2017), 21.
[125] F. J. G. Pederson, 'Romeo and Juliet of Stonegate: A Medieval Marriage in Crisis', *Borthwick Papers* 87 (1995), 9.
[126] *The Visitation of Hereford Diocese in 1397*, ed. I. Forrest and C. Whittick (Woodbridge, 2021), Herefordshire Cathedral Archives, A1997, f. 10v.

Simon was used against her in her attempted separation from Simon in the consistory courts on the grounds of violence, while the report of representatives of Dymock was a presentment of common knowledge that Richard had to answer.

What of the attractions of this group to women who entered into illicit relationships with them? The fifteenth-century consistory court books of Hereford tell us something of the different kinds of relationships women entered into with clerics. Sexual affairs could be brief, as in the case of chaplain John Dyer, who was accused of fornication with one Lusot in 1468, or John Ball, a vicar, who was accused of the same with Katherine Onislow, Joan Bennett, Alice Coke, and Maud Maghe.[127] Equally, relationships of longer duration could appear multiple times before the court: Thomas Nasshe, rector of Munsley, and Joan Mawndfelde appeared in 1445 and again in 1454. Thomas Gogh, chaplain, was warned to evict Margaret Bygolt from his house in February 1452, but he confessed in April and again in July that year that they were still living together.[128] Priests did not always live with their long-term partners: John Verne and his partner Katherine lived separately but their relationship was well known to parishioners, 'not least because they had sex in the parish church'.[129] That the relationship was of some duration highlights an interesting dialectic between the 'illicit' and the 'normal', not least in terms of why the case came to court at this particular moment.

The comparative laxity of the church courts in cases involving clergy versus lay couples may in fact be key here. Women often found it difficult to muster compurgators viewed as reliable in the eyes of the church courts. Clergy, as we have seen gathered colleagues from neighbouring parishes in what appears as a tacit arrangement for mutual assistance, attesting to each other's good character. Might secular clergy – men with their own vested interest in keeping the relationship a secret and in denying, often successfully, any accusations to the contrary – have represented a

[127] Werner, 'Promiscuous Priests and Vicarage Children', 167.
[128] Ibid, 168.
[129] Ibid, 169.

calculated choice for women seeking a sexual or emotional partner? For Emma Hasill, a priest provided both the consolation and means of escape from a 'very cruel' abusive marriage. Emma testifies that she left her husband 'by the advice of Sir William Gavon', suggesting that she had confided in him. She then stayed in his rooms, where 'he held her' for the entirety of Lent.[130] McSheffrey argues that 'held' here is a euphemism for sex.[131] Arguably, this is no euphemism, but a recognised term for a living arrangement that includes sex, as Janelle Werner has found that maintenance was used interchangeably with *tenere*, to hold, in visitation records to describe concubinage and other illicit relationships of mid- to long-term duration.[132] Emma was reconciled with her husband through her neighbours' mediations; soon after, however she left him again, citing his cruelty.[133] In a paradoxical way, relationships with priests might have been less dangerous for women because the men involved would typically get away with it and were thus perhaps less anxious or vindictive. One obvious objection, though, is to ask what happened if the woman concerned got pregnant.

Dispensations for ordination and legitimation demonstrate that it was possible for priests' sons to be received into the priesthood themselves.[134] Sometimes, we only know of priests' children via the accounts for boarding arrangements for illegitimate children.[135] Anna Decons, a singlewoman, confessed that the chaplain Christopher Wake was the father of her child when she was brought before the court in 1517.[136] In an unusual demonstration of clerical sexual bravado, in 1529, under the charge of impregnating a woman named Margaret, a priest from the parish of Dixton claimed that he had carnally known '100 women'.[137] Such evidence of how priests viewed

130 CD, Office c. Emma Hasill and Sir William Gavon.
131 See ibid; McSheffrey's gloss.
132 Werner, '"Just as the Priests Have Their Wives": Priests and Concubines in England, 1375-1549' (DPhil Thesis, University of North Carolina, 2009), 193-5.
133 CD, Office c. Emma Hasill and Sir William Gavon.
134 S. McDougall, 'Bastard Priests: Illegitimacy and Ordination in Medieval Europe', *Speculum* 94:1 (2019), 138-73, at 166-7.
135 Maddern, 'Between Households', 76.
136 Werner, 'Promiscuous Priests and Vicarage Children', 167.
137 Ibid, 173.

their own sexual behaviour is rare, though Werner notes another example in Richard Hall, the vicar of Leominster, Hereford. Werner argues that some churchmen may have felt some tension between their clerical and masculine identities, but clearly found ways to resolve it.[138] In two consecutive years, 1527-8, Hall was summoned for impregnating Joan Merycke, then Elizabeth Joyner. He denied both charges, but never disproved the accusations through compurgation. In 1531, he was summoned for preaching that breaching celibacy was no great offence, the wording of which was recorded in the vernacular by the court clerk:

> carnall pleasure was naturall and yt was not that thynge that god taketh vengeans for a lytle confession wolde put it lyghtely away.[139]
>
> [Carnal pleasure was natural, and it was not something for which God takes vengeance for; a little confession would easily set it aside.]

This may sound like the sweet-talking of a rogue priest, potentially exaggerated for a reforming context. Yet it is revealing nonetheless of how contemporaries may have perceived the attitudes of vowed celibates. Expressions similar to Hall's reported speech were evidently widespread enough that Robert Mannyng spoke of them in his *Handlyng Synne* more than two centuries before:

> As sum of þys lewed men seys
> God of heuene ys so curteys
> Þat he shal on domysday certeynly
> For-ȝyue þe synne of lechery
> lechery ys but lyght synne,
> he wyl haue mercy on al þerynne[140]
>
> [As some of these unlearned (lit. lewd) men say
> God of heaven is so courteous
> That he shall on Doomsday certainly
> Forgive the sin of lechery
> Lechery is but light sin
> He will have mercy on all therein]

For some priests at least, there was no contradiction at all between sex – what Werner calls their masculinity – and their orders, because all humans sinned. Celibacy was not necessarily the primary

[138] Werner, 'Promiscuous Priests and Vicarage Children', 174.
[139] Ibid; my translation.
[140] Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, 22, ll. 589-94.

marker of clerical masculinity, and while incontinent priests were not the norm in late medieval England, neither were they anomalies.[141] Women quite often had sexual relationships with priests. It was known that this could happen, and equally known that it contradicted priests' orders, even if a minority argued against its seriousness. This more flexible approach to sexuality was unlikely to rewrite a social system in isolation, but signals that there was a broad range of potential responses for priests engaging in extra-marital sex.

What of the singlewomen who heard such sermons, and/or engaged sexually with priests? One microstudy of extra-marital sex and pregnancy shines light on how relationships with priests impacted the women involved. Ann J. Kettle examined singlewomen in the small cathedral city of Lichfield, using what little remains of visitation records from around the mid-fifteenth century to investigate women brought to the attention of the ecclesiastical authorities.[142] Kettle's study is based on the chance survival of one volume of visitation *acta* from the jurisdiction of the dean of the cathedral chapter. It contains presentments of offenders from October 1461, January 1466, and November 1466, as well as the proceedings that followed. 136 women (or roughly one in eighteen of the adult population of women) appear in the visitations.[143] These largely lived on the fringes of society. One-fifth of the total claimed to be married but estranged from their husbands, or otherwise were identified with a different surname. The majority of unmarried women were identified only by their Christian names. The twenty-three servants were identified by their Christian name and the name of their employer. One was identified as a seamstress; other women had occupational aliases such as Matilda Midwyf, Ellen Nurse, or Rose Mustardmaker. Twenty-seven of the women presented produced thirty-eight illegitimate children between them. If they did not live in the house of an employer, urban women might live alone or with other women.

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141 For the institution of clerical celibacy, see A. L. Barstow, *Married Priests and the Reforming Papacy: the Eleventh-Century Debates* (New York, 1982).

142 The records of the Cathedral were destroyed by a fire in the seventeenth century, and the governance of the town was divided between several agencies, none of which leave records extant. See Kettle, 'Ruined Maids', 23.

143 Ibid., 26.

Ellen Glyn alias Nurse shared a house with Ellen Wygan. Each had a child, and Glyn's alias may suggest employment as a wetnurse or foster mother. Their living together may have been out of necessity or attachment, but the two mothers may well have found ways of supporting each other through sole childcare. Their reputations, it seems, were intertwined; each was 'badly defamed'. It is this that brought them to the attention of the dean. Sworn men of the town presented offenders that they had discovered, and the visitations provided the opportunity for purgation, or otherwise, punishment.

Ellen Glyn, when called to explain the child, claimed that it was born to a woman now dead, and a priest – hence, perhaps, her alias. From several other presentments, we find that women who experienced extra-marital pregnancies could move temporarily out of the city to give birth to their child to try to avoid public scrutiny over the children in their care, although not always successfully. Helen Swanne was believed to have given birth in Leicestershire to the child of Roger Hunt. Women both came to and left Lichfield for pregnancies: Margaret Harrendon gave birth in Lichfield to the child of a married servant of the Archdeacon of Coventry, while Margaret Glover went to Coventry for the birth of her first illegitimate child. Many of the fathers not named were suspected to be members of the clergy. Just as the woman of *Þis enþer day I mete a clerke* who plans to leave town and claim to be on pilgrimage for the duration of her pregnancy, so too the women of the Lichfield visitations moved to avoid being seen to be visibly pregnant, but otherwise continued to live in the town.[144]

The consequences for fornication with a priest were not usually equally wrought upon both parties in these cases. Two women each blamed the other's pregnancy on a friar; both women were excommunicated. Joanna Bulkley, who was living with another woman, confessed to bearing a child by William Fisher, but claimed he had attempted to bribe her to swear she would not reveal

[144] See above, Chapter Two, 129; For a case of a woman who wet-nurses an unmarried mother's child, see Maddern, 'Surviving Strategies', 59.

paternity.[145] The community was central in identifying offenders and coordinating a response: Mariot Irish was taken from Robert Beckett's bed by six neighbours, and was later sentenced to five beatings, while Beckett was allowed to purge himself by the oaths of five of those same neighbours.

In other cases, pregnant women who were unable or unwilling to name a father were treated harshly. When Margaret Glover was presented for her first illicit pregnancy, she refused to name the father. After her second child, she was pressured by her mother, father, and the court: she claimed she had known so many men it would be impossible to say who the father was. Finally, however, she accused William Sumner, a chaplain in St Mary's church, of being the father of both her children. She was sentenced to be beaten around St Mary's church on the next five Sundays, dressed in a chemise and tunic with a kerchief on her head and a candle in her hand.[146] It is not clear whether the unusually severe violence was because of her reticence, perhaps out of fear of informal retribution, or because the dean judged her final allegation to be untrue. In one unusual case, this pressure to establish paternity backfired. Maddern identified the case of William Anger, a rector of Yorkshire, who had two complaints registered against him in a visitation of 1400. The first was that he had refused to baptise the children of singlewomen of the parish unless they publicly revealed the fathers of their children. Secondly, he was himself was accused of fathering an illegitimate child.[147]

This small but detailed collection of cases over the course of a few years builds a picture of extra-marital sex with priests and resulting pregnancies as quite common, with a set of expectations around them. The presentments suggest little sympathy for unprotected servant women who had children by members of the clergy, but also the heightened awareness around the sexuality of both singlewomen and churchmen amongst laypeople of standing. Yet we also learn

[145] Kettle, 'Ruined Maids', 28.
[146] Ibid., 28.
[147] Maddern, 'Survival Strategies', 52-3.

that the judgements were more complex than we might assume. We can draw some conclusions about how and why cases involving clerics reached court, and the patterns of judicial action. Where sex resulted in pregnancy, women may well have been pressured to reveal paternity, although this did not necessarily result in any disciplinary consequences for the father. Community attempts at controlling sexual misbehaviour might push formal legal action, and result in priests being found in women's homes or vice versa; although, again, purgation was more freely available to clerical men (and indeed all men) than it was to singlewomen. [148]

CONCLUSION: WHEN WOMEN SPEAK

This chapter began with building a picture of the households that singlewomen lived and worked in. Where sexual relationships came to the attention of courts, these were often intra-household. It is problematic to presume pleasure or consent in these contexts, as we do not tend to have any kind of statement from the women themselves. Instead, we can demonstrate that punishment was largely the prerogative of householders. They made decisions according to their own sense of right, with an awareness that they could be implicated in any public reckoning. They also had economic considerations, as such as the expectation that they would provide for their male apprentices on marriage. This is not quite the same as suggesting that households adhered to and policed a consistent set of values around illicit sexuality. Indeed, we have observed examples where householders disagreed over how they ought to deal with extramarital sex, or in some cases even enabled it. Their efforts to push couples towards marriage were not guaranteed to succeed, but suggest that householders might have tended towards informal resolutions before involving the church courts.

Policing (and enabling) of relationships did not only occur within households. In cases of contested marriage, a whole host of players come into view, where families, friends, and neighbours variously helped or hindered sexual relationships, and subsequently made choices

[148] Forrest, *Trustworthy Men*, 133-4.

about whether these constituted proto-marital sex, or fornication. The way their judgements were expressed was overwhelmingly through how they presented the speech and actions of women. Attempts at ostracization for sexual misbehaviour were ambivalent. We do not get to see how many sexual encounters were followed by marriage contracts that held. When they did not, disputed marriage cases essentially neutralized the misbehaviour by enabling both parties to provide a narrative of the kind of relationship they thought they were entering.

This practice was unlikely to overwrite the emotional cost for either or both parties, and women's reputations may well have suffered more than men's as a result. And yet, women spoke back. Where they gave testimony, we hear their own narration of what sex meant. They spoke directly about attraction, or lack thereof, and sexual decision-making. Despite what society told them about their sexuality, women occasionally broke through a seemingly impermeable barrier to reach a sense of their bodies being their own.

Legal sources and carols alike show us that women were practising their sexuality actively, and not always by choice. This was possible, though there were many constraints and judgements. The courts were a space for judgement, but they were also fertile ground for conversation, neither utterly repressive nor a celebration of agency. Men also were held to account, and nonconsensual sex with clerics presents this with particular acuity. More than anything, though, court records show us that the world was small. Households, communities, and the institutions they used existed on top of each other, both geographically and socially superimposed. The sex lives of the people within them were equally overlapping.

Women's agency could be hard won, and sometimes at great social cost, but it was far from unimaginable. It appears that if a woman had been discovered or gossiped about by her neighbours, a marriage suit was one way for her to save face. For instance, some women may have manipulated words of sexual or marital consent to attempt to extricate themselves from, or conversely to prove the legitimacy of, a marriage contract. More often than not, however, this would not stand up in court without considerable supporting evidence. It could also be the case

that some women did not mean to contract marriage, but felt pressured to do so, in some instances even under threat.

Informal structures were powerful forces for punishing women, and women were multiply disadvantaged. But to understand better this disadvantage, I have offered several correctives. Legal evidence is distorting, because it only exists when arrangements broke down, and there must have been informal arrangements that worked well enough never to come to a court's attention. Despite the formal and informal challenges they faced, women apparently did choose to have sex outside marriage. Judgements or settlements offered something to the women involved, and legal machinery could, to a point, extricate women from unwanted relationships or enforce a marriage contract, provided that neighbours, families, friends, or employees were willing to help. These correctives remind us that, notwithstanding the influence of patriarchy, there was a space for women to feel capable of making sexual choices, and some tolerance on the part of other men and women when those choices were exposed. Overwhelmingly, the picture here is one of overlapping households where men and women in service or apprenticeships might expect to meet regularly, whether in kitchens and chambers, or streets and taverns. Court cases and songs are very different genres. But they are produced by the same world, even by the same people, and they limn the same picture.

CONCLUSION: ON DOMINANCE

In 1494, the London priest Sir Thomas Bundy was called before twelve honest men at a wardmoot inquest, to answer reports that he was in a sexual relationship with one Anne Love. This indictment was the result of reports circulated by Roger Clay and Alice Pyhell that Bundy and Love had met 'suspecyously in taverns'. The really damning evidence, however, was that 'Anne Love lened upon Sir Thomas shulder in the chirche and knaked nuttes susspecyously' [Anne Love leaned on Sir Thomas' shoulder in the church and trilled notes suspiciously].[1] To two London gossips, this was the archetypal image of fornication: a singlewoman and a priest, singing together.

Women's sexual pleasure has been foreclosed by a whole range of interpretative strategies adopted by scholars of different kinds, but there are grounds for thinking that it was more present and more ambivalent in medieval society than we tend to think. There is the implicit assumption that because misogyny was a dominant discourse in late medieval England, 'Women's songs' have to be read from within that discourse to be correctly understood. But among other things, 'Women's songs' present attempts in the vernacular to articulate concepts of consent and non-consent.

Courts did not straightforwardly place sole accountability for sexual misdemeanors onto women. Just as Sara McDougall has suggested, this does not belie the misogynistic principles that structured both narratives about sex, and how these narratives were received within a court setting; even so, women could employ a range of manoeuvres, and knowingly perform these within specific legal and economic cultures and in a particular cultural environment.[2] Women were tough and wily; sometimes – oftentimes, as they knew – this was not enough. They could be full of rage and

[1] London, Guildhall Library, MS 9064/5, fol. 162v-163r, quoted in R. M. Wunderli, *London Church Courts and Society on the Eve of the Reformation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 77-8. Bundy sued for defamation; the case was referred to the Consistory Court for resolution.
[2] See Chapter Four, 222.

of fear; they were also mordantly, exquisitely funny in describing their experiences. All of this features in 'Women's songs' and in courtroom depositions.

The social world of later medieval England did not simply ostracize sexually active singlewomen. There was a discourse, repeated widely and often, that once a woman had sex outside of licensed contexts (and sometimes even within them), she was unable to refuse sex. This persisted because it enabled a system where there was little to no recourse against unwanted sexual contact. Women were conceptually held responsible for what happened to their bodies outside of conjugal relations by the kinds of tautologies we examined in Chapter One.

This unjust situation does not mean that 'Women's songs' must be interpreted as if reinforcing misogynist views about women. That way lies circular reading. We have shown in Chapter Two that when we start with what is actually on the page, it is near impossible to reach the conclusion that medieval society point blank refused to conceive of a world where women's pleasure could be both important and even more vitally, interact with a spectrum of emotions, experiences, dangers and ambivalences that together constitute a sexual subjectivity.

And yet – I come back again to Kristeva's point that language cannot get away from its own constraints. The existing historiography of medieval women's sexuality has reached the stage where we understand the violent misogyny, and we temper it with the sense that women could transgress boundaries to experience pleasure outside of socially accepted contexts. But the space of transgression is not enough, ethically or historically. It is actually a poor description of what is in play. Gwerful Mechain's *Cywydd y cedor* offers a really powerful insight into the state of sexual discourse in the later medieval period.[3] We have not done justice to poems like this, because we have conjured a social world in which a praise poem to the vagina, written by someone who has one, is more or less unthinkable. It is not that medieval women could speak of their pleasure, or

[3] See above, Chapter Two, 86.

that men would not. There was silence in their textual and social worlds; but there was also, simultaneously, discussion!

At the most basic level, we might argue: if there were words, then women's pleasure was part of the system. That does *not* mean that expressions of pleasure are counter-texts, laughing at women and serving only to reinforce the 'norm'. It is a good deal more complicated than that. 'Women's songs' do not only play as a counter-discourse to misogyny: those engaged in the construction of the dominant discourse were also (at least) aware of the nuances of active desire, choice, and pleasure. That these concepts appear together means that it is absolutely the gaze of the historian that leads us to view the former as central and normative, the latter as marginal and transgressive.

These lyrics articulate pleasure without disguising the various checks and dangers that surrounded sexual contact. This constitutes a sexual subjectivity for women that also finds expression in a social reality. The two must remain distinct, as we cannot simply read back women's 'experience' from lyrics. But the latter do tell us something about sex acts, and how women could express and signal both sexual interest and non-consent. They also tell us something about the groups who were reading them.

Misogyny and pleasure appear in the same breath, on the same page, in the same ink – they are produced together. 'Transgression' is not happening in response to the 'norm'. Having stepped beyond text and counter-text, we reach a point where we have to ask: why portray these deep ambivalences in writing? Medieval people's sense of dialogue is so developed, so painfully aware of multiple meanings. I think it tells us much about how misogyny reproduces itself. Men who engaged with 'Women's songs' could see the attraction of mutually active and pleasurable sex, and read the lack of consequence as positive, or see negative outcomes as regrettable – and not necessarily deservedly so. But there was no impetus, no reason to connect these responses to their life and their own sexuality – because we have seen that structures rarely protected actual women. Understanding that women might be discerning and selective sexual agents in lyric, or the violation

of sexual assault in a poetic context, does not necessarily lead to self-reflection or assessment in real time where a man thinks sex is available.

What we as historians commute into social anxieties around illicit sex is a failure perhaps to see that the women themselves, and the people they had sex with, and witnesses to those relationships, were operating in at least two social codes (though surely many, many more). The household, neighbours, kinship, friends, community, and strangers – all kinds of knowing and conversation operate between and across these. In each, men and women could choose to benefit from misogynistic structures, and oftentimes, they did.

Another thesis could discuss all this in terms of masculinity. As we have seen, men exerted strong control of the written record in which women appeared, and could be arbiters of sexual censure; they also had complex relationships with sexuality – their own, as well as women's. We should recognise the potential for masculine sublimation of women's pleasure in order to explore men's own bodies and desires, whether lay or clerical. But that is not this thesis. In closing, we return to the disruptive, pedagogic possibilities of 'Women's songs'. What remains most difficult to reconcile is that the lyrics can appear alongside the kinds of misogynist texts we saw in Chapter One. The songs, then, are not the unmediated annunciation that (real) women wanted (real) sex, nor are they a straightforward cry of agency in desire in the face of misogyny. But perhaps what they *are* is even more significant: representations that allowed for women as desiring subjects, often without negative social consequence, and mostly likely performed by groups of any gender. Sexual playfulness and pleasure does not merely indicate transgression or confirmation of a social order: it reveals a social order that is always in flux. As I hope to have shown, that is where we need to start.

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