

Invisible Emotions
Marital and Parental Relationships
In Gaul and England, 500-1000 AD

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In Western Europe, the five-hundred years following the fall of the Western Roman Empire were a period of dynamic change: an entire continent was converted from its ancient pagan beliefs to Christianity through a painful series of military invasions and missionary campaigns. Out of the chaos of the Roman decline developed a loosely feudal system, in which hierarchies were adapted from ancient models to fit the new needs of an increasingly institutionalized church and newly Christianized kings. The voices that now echo from that turbulent epoch of conversion and reconstruction are those of a small literate elite comprised almost entirely of bishops, clerics, monks, and a few nuns, joined in the ninth century by some educated nobility. From the writings of bishops and courtiers emerge figures of kings and courts, and from the historical and religious treatises of clerics come stories of saints and martyrs.

What is noticeably, though not surprisingly, absent, is any purposeful account of the vast underclass that powered with blood and sweat the sweeping changes for which their kings and clergy were figureheads. The peasant majority remains for the most part invisible in these so-called “Dark Ages.” We must wait for Chaucer and his contemporaries in the High Middle Ages to turn their view purposefully to include a broader spectrum of society, a broadening of perspective that historians have recently made great use of to make intensive study of the living conditions and family relationships of the lower classes in that period. However, the ancestors of those much-studied farmers, merchants, and tradesmen remain largely shrouded in shadows. Only occasionally do they appear, sneaking into accounts of saintly miracles as parents begging for the salvation of their sick children, or into the letters of missionaries where they serve as examples of the problems faced in proselytizing a continent. Some of their behavior can be inferred from the sermons written to protect them from vice, and some from the records of court

proceedings in which disputes between them were settled. There are two ninth-century surveys of peasant households that provide insight into family size and distribution. From among these scattered pieces, this paper seeks to construct a coherent image of the emotional lives of these people by answering some of the fundamental questions that delineate a person's daily existence: what filled their days? What characterized relationships between husband and wife? What role did children play in the lives of their parents and community? Limited answers to these questions can be found in the sources mentioned above, and holes in the evidence can be at least partially filled with inferences taken from the more ample source material detailing the lives of the upper classes of the period, as well as from later sources illuminating the lifestyles of the distant descendants of the peasantry of the late first millennium. Specifically, the fundamental human relationships between husband and wife and parent and child will be the focus of this paper, in the geographical and temporal context of Gaul and England, two regions culturally and experientially linked by the similar circumstances they shared and the missionary envoys that traveled between them, in the years 500 to 1000 AD.

The world in that place and period was a remarkably brutal place: repeated plagues swept across the continent in the sixth century, bloody wars occupied much of Gaul and England intermittently across the centuries, and famine loomed continuously as an ever-present threat. Education for the peasantry was non-existent, and even missionaries supported by the wealth and power of the Roman Catholic Church found themselves "constantly beset by hunger, thirst, cold, and...hostility."¹ It was in many ways a Hobbesian state of nature, in which there were "no arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of men solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."² In this harsh world, so experientially different from the modern reality, what composed those relationships now so closely related to

love and emotion? Did spouses and parents and children share interpersonal bonds of love and affection, or did they live together merely for reasons of practicality and labor division? In total, did the peasants of pre-millennial Gaul and England share deep emotional attachments with their families, or did the brutality of their world force them to live alienated and alone, guided only by pragmatism and the instinctual desire for survival?

A Note on Source Selection

Sources from the period 500 to 1000 AD are extremely scarce. At some point, I considered giving up all-together in my search for glimpses of the common life of the period and turning to a better documented era. However, those few precious anecdotes that do exist are so poignant and intriguing that I decided to persist. To form an even partially complete picture of marital and parental relationships, I have had to draw on sources from outside both the geographical region and temporal period in which I focus. In choosing those extraneous sources, I have used two criteria. For sources from outside Gaul and England, I have chosen only those that share some tie with the region through common belief or governing body. For example, I use a ninth century letter from a Roman Pope to a community of new believers in Bulgaria, because aspects of the letter's content speak more to the general concerns of the church than to the specific situation of the Bulgars. For sources written in periods later than that on which I focus, I have attempted to limit my usage to those that represent popular folklore and belief or long-established religious doctrine. These sources are more likely to represent common trends or conditions in society, and therefore shed some light on the centuries that precede their authorship, as it was in those prior centuries that the knowledge contained in them was accumulated. For example, I refer to many excerpts from illustrative sermon exempla first recorded in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but drawn from a long tradition of popular

myth. I do not, by contrast, draw from Chaucer, who was revolutionary in his own time and therefore unlikely to represent trends inherited from past generations. Though this method of drawing on later and geographically diverse sources is certain to introduce a higher level of generality into this inquiry, I have chosen it to achieve a fuller picture of a world hidden in shadow.

Marriage

The relationship between husband and wife was the focus of a great deal of religious concern throughout the second half of the first millennium. The great theologians struggled to fit human sexuality and the need for procreation into a religion longing to avoid the powerful temptations of lust. They eventually settled on a doctrine, derived from the teachings of St. Paul, which glorified the chaste life of holy abstinence, but gave marriage and the lawful sex that it entailed as a permissible alternative. However, the illiterate peasantry was far removed from these theological debates defining the divine role of marriage; to them, marriage formed the fundamental unit of society, and the central relationship of their lives. Marriage was a partnership for procreation and survival, and entering into this state of cohabitation and collaboration signified an individual's full arrival into secular adult society. To marry, a man required the economic resources to pay a dower to his bride, to support himself, his wife, and the children that were likely soon to follow, and, if he was not a freeman, to pay the marriage fee demanded by his manorial lord.

From the seeming obsession with which clerical authors focused on the philosophical and practical implications of marriage, and from Carolingian manorial documents recording household compositions and holdings, it seems that among rural peasants marriage was the normal state of existence, though not necessarily a universal one. In farm listings from a ninth

century survey of the households associated with the monastery of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, twenty-eight land-holders are listed with their wives, nine without wives, and two as having children but no spouses (widowers it would seem).³ Seventy-seven percent of this estate's population either was or had been married at the time of the survey, and it is possible that the rate was even higher, as it is difficult to know if the eight seemingly single land-holders were indeed bachelors (one is listed to live with his mother), or if they had wives who were for some reason not included (perhaps they were serfs of another estate). Whatever the exact rate, this small survey is representative of a larger population almost entirely engaged in marital relationships, a society-wide involvement further evidenced by the vast proliferation of religious treatises and laws concerning the practice of marriage.

A twelfth century document dealing with topics of marriage and virginity quotes a generalized "every-woman" who gives as her reason for marriage that "a man's strength is worth much, and I am obliged to his help for support and food. From a man and woman united springs worldly wealth."⁴ This statement is indicative of a society in which marriage was a working partnership for support and sustenance, and both husband and wife were critical to the economic well-being of the family unit. The long list of duties required of each tenant family of Saint-Germain is evidence enough of the necessity of this partnership. Each farm-holder was required to "do service in Anjou and in the month of May at Paris", to pay "2 sheep, 9 hens, 30 eggs, 100 planks and as many shingles, 12 staves, 6 hoops, and 12 torches," to take "2 loads of wood to Sûtré", to "enclose 4 perches with stakes in the lord's court, 4 perches with hedge in the meadow, and as much as necessary at harvest time," as well as plough "8 perches with winter wheat, 26 perches with spring wheat," and spread "manure on the lord's fields."⁵ A similar document compiled by the Abbé Irminon in the region of Villeneuve-St. Georges lists

comparable rents, with the addition for one family that “his wife makes cloth of the wool of the demesne and bakes as many loaves as she is asked to do.”⁶ Feudal dues also consisted of small craftwork that was usually done by women in a special section of the central manorial house, which Charlemagne himself ordered be supplied with “linen, wool, woad, vermilion, madder, wool combs, teasers, soap, grease, vessels, and the other objects which are necessary.”⁷ So many demands, which required constant labor both out in the fields and at domestic chores of keeping chickens, gathering wood, making cloth, and tending sheep, would have severely overstrained a single laborer. The Carolingian manorial system explicitly recognized and exploited the production value of both spouses, and the combined efforts of a married couple were necessary to fulfill the demands of the system and survival. Though England did not in the ninth century employ exactly the same manorial structure as did the Carolingians, its peasants would have faced similar demands and hardships. Marriage was a necessary partnership in which two individuals combined skills and labor to survive in a demanding and exhausting world.

The practical necessity of a spouse is further evidenced by the common practice of widows to enter rapidly into remarriage, or, in the absence of a suitable new spouse and with adequate economic means, into religious orders upon a husband’s death. This practice of rapid remarriage is directly referenced by a fourteenth century cleric who wrote that “for her part, once her husband has died the widow remarries right away,”⁸ and the missionary St. Boniface mentions in his correspondence several episodes involving swift second marriages. Numerous hagiographies make reference to widowed parents entering into monastic life once their spouse has passed away. This trend of either immediate remarriage or entrance into the supportive world of a monastery suggests that survival on ones own was not in most cases a plausible option. Those widows unable or unwilling to seek a second husband and without the economic

resources to pay to enter a monastic community had no choice but to depend upon their children, as evidenced by records in the polyptyques from Saint-Germain-des-Prés and Villeneuve-St. Georges of single men supporting their mothers and court records of less fortunate widows suing, often unsuccessfully, for sustenance from their grown children. The marriage partnership was the economic and social foundation of peasant life, and without its unification of efforts and resources, survival was difficult.

While these discussions of feudal demands and remarriage rates are useful to illustrate that marriage was indeed a union founded in labor and necessity, they are unable to shed light on the far more interesting and ephemeral elements of the marriage bond. To get at these almost invisible elements of emotion and affection, a wide array of sources must be consulted and compared, and from their broken reflections of relationships one-thousand years old, some version of the original reality may be constructed. To begin this reconstruction, it is logical to revisit the accounts of second marriages, whose proliferation illuminates, in addition to the practical necessity of marriage, also the nature of that necessary bond. The correspondence of bishops in both Gaul and England show that second marriages were common enough to demand well-defined church doctrines governing their morality and practice. Pope Gregory II in 732 instructed Bishop Boniface to “forbid those whose wives have died to enter into second marriages,”⁹ but by 866 this recommendation had been significantly relaxed, as Pope Nicholas I wrote to the newly converted Bulgars “since you ask if a man can take another wife when his own wife has died, know that of course he can.”¹⁰ A letter of instruction from Pope Gregory I to the first generation of missionaries in England, the correspondence of St. Boniface during his missionary tenure in northern Gaul, and court records from thirteenth and fourteenth century England all make references to second and third marriages of widows. These references, in

addition to illustrating the often transitive nature of marriage, also suggest that there were frequently significant age differences between spouses, as a widow might well be sought as a wife by her own step-child (a practice which church authorities were anxious to end).¹¹ Together these regulations and records paint marriage as not, for many, a once-in-a-lifetime partnership between peers, but rather a union formed across sometimes large age gaps, which was likely to end with the death of one spouse and be quickly recreated with another. Though this picture does not rule out the possibility of marriages, especially first marriages, formed for reasons including those of the heart, it continues to emphasize economic partnership and procreation as the primary purposes of marriage, and suggests that any concept of romantic love or perhaps even affection was unnecessary to the formation of a marriage bond.

Of one thing the surviving texts leave no doubt about: sex was a very important aspect of marriage. From many clerical accounts, it seems the only reason for marriage, though economic and emotional references in other documents balance this perspective. St. Augustine in England, Pope Gregory I, and the parish priests who composed *exempla* to illustrate their sermons to the peasantry, all show great concern for controlling the excesses of sex within marriage. An exemplum of thirteenth century preacher Jacques de Vitry warns of dangers to unborn children, admonishing “I heard about certain men who bother their pregnant wives when they are near childbirth, because the men do not want to or are unable to abstain from their pregnant wives for a short time. As a result, the child in the mother’s womb is killed and deprived of baptism.”¹² St. Augustine asks in his first missionary inquiry to Pope Gregory “how soon after child-birth may a husband have relations with his wife?” and “may a man enter church after relations with his wife before he has washed.” Gregory in his reply laments the practice of some couples to renew sexual relations before the weaning of a newly-born child.¹³ Authorities were equally

concerned about cold marriages, for it was assumed that if sexual fulfillment were not found in the marriage bed, it would be sought elsewhere, a sin that the clergy wished to prevent. The Church therefore taught that sex was a marital duty just as much as was the material sustenance of one another, and bishops and Popes at various times extolled married couples to fulfill that duty. The importance given to marriage as a controlled forum for sex is further emphasized in the decision of Pope Gregory II to allow any man whose wife fell too ill to perform her marital duties to take on another wife, so long as he continued to support the sick woman as well.¹⁴

Though the religious men writing these directives were far-removed from the intimacy of the peasant bedroom, the proliferation of letters, regulations, and sermons concerning sexual practices strongly suggests that sex was an integral part of a peasant's life. The implications, however, of this intense physical relationship between married couples are not clear; while sexual activity can be tied to love, the visceral manner in which missionaries and priests describe it suggests that it often served merely as a release of sexual energy and lustful desire. The rampant fear of cuckoldry present in much of the literature of the period, and the Catholic portrayal of sex for procreation as marital obligation, imply that sex served many purposes, many of which had nothing to do with love. Thus, these references alone cannot be taken as evidence of strong emotional relationships, though they do at least hint at an intense connection between some couples.

One thing that can be concluded from the proliferation of sexual activity is that, in a relatively fertile couple, the woman would likely be pregnant for most of her life, the conception of one child following immediately upon the weaning of another. Childbirth was a deeply traumatic event for a family, one that severely endangered the health of the mother and that brought a tenuous and fragile child into the world. The event must have caused considerable

anxiety in the family, as the mother lie crying out in mortal danger in the one room home, while her husband shared “her groans in childbirth, and suffer[ed] torture” because she was “in danger,”¹⁵ and each awaited the arrival of a child whose very survival was precarious and whose birth meant another mouth to feed and body to clothe with already scarce resources. Most peasants would have lived continuously in this cycle that so tightly intertwined life and death, repeating it at 30-month intervals for the majority of their married lives. It must have lent a sort of rhythm to their lives together, a strange rhythm which carried the entire family from hope, to fear, from new life, to the brink of death. Though the cycle itself does not shed light directly on the emotional relationship between husband and wife, it is critically important to an understanding of the basic structure in which that relationship existed. Every couple would have with an acute awareness of the proximity of death, and of the fragility of their relationship in the face of looming mortality. Love would have been difficult in these circumstances, as it would always be intimately intertwined with the fear and likelihood of the loss of the beloved. Yet, perhaps it is in just such tenuous realities that love becomes most necessary. If love did exist between couples in this society, it is a testament to the power of that emotion and the people who held it, that they were able to give and receive affection in a world rife with loss.

What is now called domestic violence was undoubtedly present in at least some households. In one particularly disturbing *exempla* anecdote, a story is told of a drunken man who put a ploughshare in a sack and beat his wife with it, breaking many of her bones. The wife’s family charged the man with spousal mistreatment, against which charge he defended himself by claiming “that he had beat her with a sack and he had not touched her except with the sack.”¹⁶ Because there were no witnesses that could verify the presence of the ploughshare “the husband escaped the hand of the judge and led his wife, with her broken bones, back home.”

There is continuing evidence of domestic violence in Coroners' Rolls dating from the late thirteenth century which record cases of spousal murder,¹⁷ and in the sermons of St. Bernardino in the fifteenth century in which he admonishes his congregation to "have patience" with their wives; "not for every cause is it right to beat her. No!"¹⁸ Though these last two sources are drawn from many years after the period of interest, they are relevant in that they illustrate a consistent trend of acknowledged domestic violence and of a societal differentiation between acceptable beatings and more severe violence which could be prosecuted as a crime. Especially from the defense of the drunkard husband in the *exempla* anecdote, it seems that mild household violence was considered routine and acceptable. So long as the husband beat his wife only with a sack, no harm was considered done and society continued peacefully on its way apparently without judgment. While it is unfair to take these exceptional stories, especially chosen by preachers for their ability to elicit strong reaction or recorded in court rolls expressly for their criminality, as evidence of a society of severely abused women, they do indicate the widespread presence of at least low levels of violence within the peasant household. However, this violence does not necessarily imply hatred or contempt. This was a society that valued physical reprimand as a necessary means to ensure societal and moral conformity, whose writers referred repeatedly to the biblical instruction that a father must use the rod to discipline most harshly the son he loves most. St. Bernardino's admonition implies, even in its condemnation of excessive violence, that there were causes for which "it is right to beat her," and the *Exempla* story proceeds from the assumption that beating one's wife with a sack was an acceptable practice. At least low levels of physical reprimand were considered normal and fully within the rights, and even duties, of a husband. Thus, the widespread presence of this violence does not alone preclude the possibility of loving relationships. It must, however, cast troubling shadows on the

image of an affectionate and egalitarian partnership, for if a man uses force to require obedience from his wife, then their relationship cannot be one of loving, or even respecting, equals. While this line of evidence is, in the end, inconclusive, it nonetheless must shade any other conclusions drawn from other sources.

While women may have been subject to largely male-inflicted violence in this period, it seems that they were respected and sometimes even feared for their domestic intellect. There are numerous references, usually from the negative perspective of cuckoldry tales, of women outsmarting their husbands. Marie de France, writing in the twelfth century, tells two fables about peasant men betrayed by the cunning of their wives. In one, a man who has witnessed his wife in bed with another man is convinced by her to dismiss what he has seen as illusion. To do this, she makes him look at and describe his own reflection in a basin of water. To his description she replies “All the same...you’re not inside that basin with all your clothes on. What you see is an illusion. You ought not to believe your eyes, which often tell lies,” an argument that leads her husband to conclude that “each person had better believe and know what his wife tells him to see, instead of what false eyes see.”¹⁹ The moral Marie draws from this story is that “by this exemplum, we understand that common sense and cleverness are more helpful to many a person than having riches and relatives.” In *The Fifteen Joys of Marriage*, an ironic diatribe against the married life, the wives in the various “joyous” scenarios almost always outwit their husbands, using cunning to turn their husbands’ suspicions to their own benefit. At the end of his seemingly scathing attack on women, the author claims that “everything here is to their praise and honor.” While it is difficult to imagine that the author really intended his work to praise women, his portrayals of feminine guile are representative of a rather widespread perception of female intellectual superiority within the domestic sphere. While most sources

documenting this intelligence do so within the negative context of cuckoldry, there is no reason to doubt that it extended to the perception of women in more positive contexts. Again, as with the *Exempla* and the sermons of San Bernardino, though Marie's fables and the *Joys of Marriage* are from the first centuries of the second millennium, they carry within them popular sentiment and story, and it is not unreasonable to take the views expressed in them as indicative of past generations. It is likely then that women were, at least some sizeable fraction of the time, accorded a good deal of respect within the domestic sphere in the final centuries of the first millennium. In the context of marriages that were partnerships of survival, it makes a good deal of sense that women merited and received respect for their critical contributions to the well-being of the family. Whether this respect can be translated as love is unclear, for it fits equally well in both emotional and purely pragmatic models of marriage. It could be a respect resultant of deep affection between husband and wife, but just as easily one founded in the practical mutual reliance of the spouses.

One important piece of marital context that must not be overlooked is the considerable involvement of extended family in the lives of a married couple. Marriages did not exist in a vacuum, but instead were usually deeply embedded in a larger social world of parents, siblings, and children. The general trend seems to be one in which the wife traveled to live with her husband's family, either in a tiny private home on the family land or in a larger communal dwelling. The presence of several subunit families in one living environment undoubtedly caused conflicts on many levels, and there are at least a few references that hint at the tension and sometimes outright hostility that occurred. One hagiographer tells us "to be sure, the saying of certain secular wisdom, that all mothers-in-law hate daughters-in-law, has some truth in it."²⁰ Anecdotal evidence of this sentiment may be found in a sermon exemplum in which a young

husband refuses to provide even basic care for his widowed mother, unwilling or unable to keep his mother and his new wife in the same house. Another exemplum tells of a married son who wrapped his aged father in a sheepskin and dumped him out of the house, leaving him to die of exposure.²¹ Tensions were commonplace, though they would not have in most cases been so acute. Though most stories involve the interaction of a couple with the husband's extended family, there is also evidence that brides could maintain ties with their parents and siblings after leaving their natal home. In the *exempla* anecdote of the man who attacked his wife with a ploughshare, it was her natal family that charged him with the abuse. Thus, both husband and wife existed in a world full of obligations outside of their marriage partnership, some of which exerted forceful negative pressure on the relationship. The choices made by individuals in these circumstances varied: some prioritized their natal families over the well-being of their spouses, as evidenced in several stories of severe spousal neglect,²² while others abandoned their natal families in favor of their husbands or wives, the choice made by the two men in the sermon exempla given above. The election of spouse over natal family suggests a strong bond between the married couple, strong enough to drive a child to abandon his or her parents and siblings. Though this bond may sometimes have been one of necessity or law (surely need and law were the only things that kept the battered wife with her husband in the ploughshare exempla), it is not unreasonable to infer that sometimes it was a bond of love and loyalty. Thus, as with so many other cases, the evidence is inconclusive. However, the interactions between couples and their larger families do at least indicate that decisions made regarding spouses were often emotionally charged. The exact nature of that emotional content is varied and often unclear, but surely these were not relationships of merely cold pragmatism.

Furthering the move away from the image of a purely functional relationship are accounts of wives deeply distressed at news of their husbands' death or imminent danger; in 1115 Guibert, abbot of Nogent, writes that after his father was captured by a count known to hold prisoners for life, his mother "was struck down half dead with wretched sorrow; she abstained from food and drink, and sleep was still more difficult through her despairing anxiety."²³ This grief certainly appears deep, but given the practical importance of a spouse, it is difficult to determine whether it derives from love or rather from fear of the future uncertainty wrought by such a loss, especially given that Guibert continues in his tale to describe his parent's marriage as a rather unhappy one. To counter this reservation is an account given by Pope Gregory I of a peasant's grief for her dead husband, in which he describes that "during the night the widow sat near the body of her deceased husband, giving way to her grief with weeping and loud lamentation." When, "moved to compassion" by the "woman's grief," a saintly monk miraculously brought the man back to life, the widow "exhausted though she was from grief, broke into a fresh display of emotion. Her tears were now tears of uncontrolled joy."²⁴ This story is moving for the widow's powerful grief at the loss of her husband and intense joy at his return, and seems indicative of a deep emotional bond between the pair, yet it is unique. While there are a fair number of miracle stories recounting the grief of parents for their sick or dying children, this is one of the only accounts of spousal grief. No broad conclusions may therefore be drawn from these isolated incidents. However, the profound emotion of the widowed peasant of Gregory's tale is incontrovertible evidence, the first yet encountered, that there were at least a few married couples deeply bound by both passion and pragmatism.

The most important evidence of broad emotional content within peasant marriages is found, ironically, in three different documents each written to criticize the institution. St.

Jerome, a prominent theologian whose works remained influential for centuries after his death, in his diatribe against marriage written in 393, ascribed emotional motives to marriage, writing that “men marry, indeed ...to solace weariness, to banish solitude.”²⁵ Jumping forward seven-hundred years, a twelfth century letter extolling the virtues of virginity frequently refers to love within the context of marriage, warning of the unhappiness that results if a wife “loves[s]” her husband “a great deal and he thinks little” of her, and that though a couple “might love one another a great deal, either one or the other will suffer bitterly on their own.”²⁶ In the late fourteenth century, an ironic criticism of marriage tells of a peasant husband who “loves” his wife “more than himself.”²⁷ Even though the story then goes on to show how the wife manipulates her husband’s love to betray him, it is important that the husband does in fact love her, enough that he will sacrifice his own well-being and logic for her. Even more important than their immediate content, all three sources show that emotional terms were used as commonplaces in texts concerning marriage both before and after the period 500 to 1000 AD. The established usage of words such as “love” and “solace” indicates that it was through the lenses of these emotionally shaded terms that marriage was viewed. Though anecdotal accounts of the emotional realities of marriage are incredibly scarce, and for the peasantry essentially absent, the fact that marriage was described in this emotional language strongly suggests that love and affection were present in a significant fraction of marriage relationships.

Though sources from before the year 1000 are extremely rare, and those from the first centuries of the second millennium able to cast light on the entrenched views and practices of marriage are limited, they present an amazingly complex view of married life. In the few references there are to the realities of marriage, we find an incredible breadth of experience, not at all unlike that which we now associate with marriage. Some relationships appear to indeed

have been founded on love and respect, while others devolved to contain only violence and hatred. Couples were tied together by their mutual needs: the need for companionship, for sexual fulfillment, for children, and above all, for material survival. The vast majority of peasants spent their adult lives married, not infrequently to multiple spouses in a lifetime. The relationships were anything but romantic: married life began crowded by an extended family, continued under the constant pressure of the cycles of the land, suffered the pain of its own internal violence, endured the constant blessing and threat of childbirth, and ended with the death of one spouse and the often rapid remarriage of the other. This bleak reality did not, however, preclude the presence of love. There were, without doubt, miserably unhappy couples. But there too were couples who drew together under the heavy weight of their lives, and it is they whom we see in miracle tales weeping for their lost loves, and it is they who inspired the confusion of a monk in fourteenth century Gaul who wrote “although married folk consider them joys, pleasures, and delights, and believe no other joys can compare, it seems to me that, rationally speaking, these fifteen joys of marriage are rather the greatest torments...on earth.” Marriage made people irrationally happy, at least some people, and from that knowledge alone we can allow our imaginations to wander to a small hut near a field at Coudray-sur-Seine, to find a peasant named Gerbertus and his wife Adalgundis at home after a day of plowing and mending, sitting contentedly together with their two children eating a meager evening meal, tired, but happy. Certainly marriage was at its core a practical union which provided structure and safety in a precarious world, but its pragmatic value did not preclude at least some of its participants from a deep and true emotional connection.

Childhood

In late first-millennial Gaul and England, childhood was an especially precarious time in which disease and malnutrition always threatened to end a life just begun, and the status of children within the family was perilously intertwined with issues of economics and labor. The very arrival of children into the world was haunted by death, as the trials of childbirth claimed the lives of many women, leaving a sizeable fraction of the population to grow up carrying the knowledge that their mothers had died in the act of their birth. An estimated one-third of all children died within their first years of life,²⁸ and it is easy to imagine that, in order to lessen the pain of this frequent and devastating loss, parents might have kept themselves emotionally distant from their young offspring. Adding to this distance were the economic implications of each new child. Children who survived the dangers of the first years of life quickly became functionally important members of the family who joined in the daily labor of sustenance. And yet too many children could overwhelm the productive capabilities of a family and their land, and the presence of infant skeletons buried in the floors of peasant homes suggest that, in the absence of available or successful contraceptive methods, infanticide was sometimes employed to prevent intractable family growth.²⁹ The fate of grown children depended on their economic value within the family: sons were of practical importance for their ability to provide care in a parent's old age and were therefore allowed to remain within the family unit, while adult daughters held little economic value for their parents and were usually married off as soon as they were of age. As in marriage, the unforgiving circumstances of the peasant life made the relationship between parents and children one heavily burdened with issues of economic realities and lurking mortality. The question then is, in this harsh world in which children were economic units, in which one-third of them died in their first years of life, and in which a child's very

presence was often a reminder of a mother dead from the pains of childbirth, were the bonds between parents and children those of love? Was childhood a time of innocence, play, and protection, or were the children of the period essentially miniature adults, initiated from toddlerhood into the harsh realities of a grueling world?

If one looks for evidence of parental neglect and indifference, it is available. A fourteenth century sermon declares that “there are many who do not even worry whether their children are boys or girls, and there are many who have children and do not value them at all. And when they see them do some childish folly, they don’t know how to put up with it, so little discretion have they.”³⁰ From his perspective, this preacher witnessed a widespread neglect of children, enough so that he felt it necessary to regale his congregation about it. Though this sermon was written three-hundred years after the turn of the millennium, it is unlikely that the social conditions referred to within it differ significantly than those of several centuries before; the preacher did not portray child neglect as a recent development, but rather as a long-standing fact that his congregation was well aware of. The thirteenth century work, *The Fifteen Joys of Marriage*, also includes many references to child inattention and abuse, continuing the pattern of neglect. A passage in the hagiography of St. Matrona, a Byzantine saint from the early sixth century, provides earlier evidence that children were sometimes viewed as nothing more than burdens to be dealt with. It is recounted that upon the death of the saint’s daughter, she “did not grieve but was delighted in the matter, since she considered what had happened not to be the loss of a child, but relief from concern about the child.”³¹ Such a reaction to a daughter’s death reinforces the image of children as functional units, such that when Matrona found her daughter’s existence inconvenient, she considered it a blessing that death made her care no longer necessary.

Childhood lacked much of the carefree play now associated with it, and peasant children would have been involved from a very early age in the labor required to sustain the family. A fictional dialogue from the turn of the millennium includes a ploughman describing his labors to his master, in which he explains that his son serves as his assistant “to drive the oxen with a goad, and he too is hoarse with cold and shouting.”³² A peasant’s son would have been often occupied in the fields with his father and a peasant’s daughter always busy at home helping her mother. However, it was not all work and no play. Bede’s *Life of St. Cuthbert* includes a description of the pastimes of a young boy who “took delight...in mirth and clamor; and, as was natural at his age, rejoiced to attach himself to the company of other boys, and to share in their sports,” which included “jumping, running, wrestling, or any other bodily exercise.”³³ In addition to these daily amusements, a child may have occasionally joined her parents in the celebration of the many religious holidays granted by the church. At these celebrations, she might join in singing and dancing in the village churchyard, much to the dismay of the local bishop, who described such activities as “wicked songs with a chorus of dancing women.”³⁴ The fact that children were allowed leisure and play suggests that there was at least some importance placed on their special status as innocents, and from this conclusion it is only a short leap to believe that this perceived innocence precipitated affection and protection.

There are small shreds of evidence which directly indicate parental love. *The Life of St. Boniface* recounts that Boniface “had been weaned and reared with a mother’s usual anxious care,” and that “his father lavished upon him more affection than upon the rest of his brothers.”³⁵ A woman of the minor Carolingian nobility in 843 addressed a book of instruction to her “beautiful and lovable son,” and included in it the reflection that “I have observed that most women in this world take joy in their children.”³⁶ Both of these sentiments indicate the presence

of a generalized perception during the period that parents, and especially mothers, loved, or at least cared a great deal for, their children. There is also evidence that society considered children of special value. The Salic law in Gaul valued the life of a child less than ten years of age equally with that of a man directly in the king's service, and valued even more the life of a pregnant woman.³⁷ Pope Gregory I writes in his *Dialogues* of a miracle in which a young boy was saved from death after falling off a cliff into a rocky ravine. When the boy fell, "everyone was deeply concerned, and a careful search was made to recover the body, for all were certain that the poor boy was dead."³⁸ The collective effort to find the boy indicates that the welfare of children was a communal concern. This societal valuation of the lives of children must have developed out of individual affection and care.

By far the most powerful evidence for an emotional bond between parents and children comes from the moments in which that bond threatened to be permanently severed. Saints' Lives, chronicles, and the dialogues of Pope Gregory I show again and again parents seeking desperately to save the life of a beloved child, or broken by the grief of a child's death, even though experience would have taught them that death was more a part of childhood than life. Even the jaded Gregory, Bishop of Tours, finds sympathy for the young of his society in his account of an outbreak of dysentery that swept through his city, as he writes "It attacked the young children first of all and to them it was fatal: and so we lost our little ones, who were so dear to us and sweet, whom we had cherished in our bosoms and dandled in our arms, whom we had fed and nurtured with such loving care. As I write I wipe away my tears..."³⁹ Radegund of Poitiers, a contemporary of Gregory's, in writing of the pain wrought by war, describes the intense loss felt by family members of the dead, recalling that "the wife walked barefoot through her husband's blood, and the tender sister stepped over her fallen brother. The child, torn from

his mother's embrace, still hung on her lips, and there was no one to accord them a flood of mourning tears."⁴⁰ Pope Gregory I describes two miracles, one each of Saints Libertinus and Benedict, in which the desperate pleas of parents empowered the saints to bring children back to life. In one, a mother came to Libertinus "carrying her dead child in her arms." "Acting on the impulse of maternal love," she forced the monk to miraculously bring her son back to life, and wept with joy to have her son restored to her.⁴¹ In the other, a father brought his lifeless son to Saint Benedict, crying "Give me back my son! Give me back my son!" Benedict at first refused to attempt the miracle, claiming it to be beyond his powers, but conceded when "overwhelming sorrow compelled the man to keep on pleading." The Anglo-Saxon epoch *Beowulf*, in order to convey the intense grief of one of its characters, compares his loss to "the misery felt by an old man who has lived to see his son's body swing on the gallows. He begins to keen and weep for his boy, watching the raven gloat where he hangs: he can be of no help. The wisdom of age is worthless to him. Morning after morning, he awakes to remember that his child is gone."⁴² All of these accounts are striking for their passion. While it could be argued that the grief of these parents is perhaps a manifestation of an animal instinct to ensure the survival of the next generation rather than profound emotional involvement, an account of a miracle cure by St. Martin is evidence that they were in fact emotional relationships. In the story, an old man falls to the saint's feet and cries "My daughter is dying of a miserable kind of infirmity; and what is more dreadful than death itself, she is now alive only in the spirit, her flesh being already dead before the time. I beseech thee to go to her, and give her thy blessing,"⁴³ The father's concern is not merely for the survival of his child, but rather for the quality of her life. His horror at his daughter's suffering speaks of love rather than mere instinct. Though they lived in a time in which death was a familiar presence and childhood diseases snatched many early in life, these

parents still especially sought the miraculous to restore their beloved children to life. And though children were indeed important to their parents for reasons of economics and posterity, the passion with which these parents sought their children's lives and comfort is clear evidence of a bond much deeper than that of mere utility. These stories of parental love and devotion are drawn from sources across several centuries and regions, investing them with an almost universal quality. Peasant parents loved their children.

Childhood in the chaotic years of pre-millennial Europe was, in many ways, very different than the childhood of today. It was dangerous, filled very early with long days of labor, and ended upon entrance into marriage, which for women constituted a semi-permanent break with their natal family, and for men an immediate transition into the role of provider for wife, children, and perhaps parents. Parenthood was different as well: with the birth of each child parents faced one-in-three odds that they would bury their newborn infant within a few short years. And yet, for these profound differences, the emotional nature of the parent-child relationship seems largely the same. Parents loved their children, enough to desperately seek the miraculous to save them from death or torturous life. Children played games and engaged in "childish folly," while parents worried over them with "anxious care" and affection and communities protected their well-being. Children grew up, and their adult relationships with their parents took on many forms, as evidenced by the episodes referred to in the earlier discussion of the pressures of extended families on marriage, in which grown children alternatively supported or abandoned their elderly parents. As they matured into adults, some children remained close to their parents, while others became estranged from them, a familiar pattern to any modern observer. Childhood and parenthood were not then, fundamentally different states from those we know today. Parent-child relationships of the period seem to be as

varied as those of our modern world, in which some are marked by utter devotion, and others are filled only with betrayal and neglect. This fundamental human relationship existed in a harsher world, visited more often by death and danger, but it was still, at its core, founded in deep love and affection.

Conclusions

The peasants who lived in Gaul and England in the years 500 to 1000 AD were not reduced by their circumstances to a “state of nature.” Though spousal and parent-child relationships were pressured by vastly different threats and challenges than they are in the modern world, the quintessence of those fundamental human relationships remained essentially the same. The marriage partnership was for many a product of necessity, but its pragmatic importance did not preclude its participants from forming deep emotional bonds (and in unhappy cases, schisms) within it. And though children were indeed laborers for the family’s survival and parents were faced with the early loss of many of their offspring, children were nonetheless for the most part loved and nurtured. A brutal world, rank with pestilence, plague, and war, was not enough to destroy the emotional content of these fundamental relationships. As we now stand at what feels to be a precipice in the creation of the future of the human race, perhaps we can find comfort in the “mirth” and “joys” of these distant people. For in a world torn to pieces, the emotional foundation of humanity survived within the humble confines of peasant huts and hearts. That alone may give us hope that such shreds of humanity will continue to survive, whatever new adversities the future holds.

Notes:

¹ *The Correspondence of St. Boniface*, Letter 43: “The Priest Wigbert Writes to the Monks of Glastonbury about His Arrival in Germany (732-54),” trans. by C. H. Talbot in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany, Being the Lives of SS. Willibrord, Boniface, Leoba and Lebuin together with the Hodoepericon of St. Willibald and a selection from the correspondence of St. Boniface*, (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954); reprinted in *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/boniface-letters.html>>.

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, quoted in *Familiar Quotations*, 10th ed. 1919, ed. John Bartlett. <<http://www.bartleby.com/100/160.html>>

³ Trans. Paul E. Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization* (Petersborough, Broadview Press, 1993), pp 183-187; reprinted in *Love, Marriage, and Family in the Middle Age: A Reader*, ed. Jacqueline Murray (Toronto: Broadview Press Ltd., 2001), p.336-340.

⁴ Hali Meidhad trans. by . Elain Treharne in *Old and Middle English Anthology* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000), p.301

⁵ Trans. Paul E. Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*; reprinted in Murray, *Love, Marriage, ...*, p.336-340.

⁶ Trans. B.E.C. Guérard, *Polyptyque de l' Abbé Irminon*, reprinted in *A Source Book for Medieval Economic History*, eds. Roy C. Cave and Herbert H. Coulson, (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1965), pp.43-44.

⁷ Trans. in James Harvey Robinson, ed., *Readings in European History: Vol. I:* (Boston.: Ginn and Co., 1904), pp. 137-139; reprinted in the *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*. < <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/carol-devillis.html>>.

⁸ Trans. Brent A. Pitts, *The Fifteen Joys of Marriage* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985), pp.67-75; reprinted in Murray, *Love, Marriage...*, p.323.

⁹ *The Correspondence of St. Boniface*, Letter 16: “Pope Gregory II Invests Boniface with the Pallium (732),” *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/boniface-letters.html>>.

¹⁰ Trans. W. L. North from the edition of Ernest Perels, in MGH *Epistolae* VI (Berlin, 1925), pp.568-600. “The Response of Pope Nicholas I to the Questions of the Bulgars A.D. 866;” reprinted in the *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*. < <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/866nicholas-bulgar.html>>, Chapter III.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Chapter II.

¹² Jacques de Vitry, trans. J. Murray, *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares* (New York, Burt Franklin, 1971), pp.93-95, 104-05, 107, 117. Quoted in Murray, *Love, Marriage.....*, p.304-305

¹³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Shirley-Price, revised R.E. Latham (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 82-83

¹⁴ *The Correspondence of St. Boniface*, Letter 14: “Pope Gregory II Replies to Questions Put by Boniface (22 November 726),” *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/boniface-letters.html>>

¹⁵ St. Jerome, trans. Henry Wace and Philip Schaff in St. Jerome, *Against Jovinian*, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 6 (Oxford: James Parker and Company, 1893), pp.383-84; reprinted in Murray, *Love, Marriage...*, p. 290

¹⁶ Jacques de Vitry, trans. J. Murray, *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares* (New York, Burt Franklin, 1971), pp.93-95, 104-05, 107, 117; reprinted in Murray, *Love, Marriage.....*, p.304

¹⁷ Trans. Charles Gross, *Select Cases from the Coroners' Rolls 1265-1413*, Seldon Society (London: Bernard Quartich, 1896), pp. 13, 15, 38, 45-46, 70; reprinted in Murray, *Love, Marriage...*, p.392-294.

¹⁸ St. Bernardino of Siena, trans. C.G. Coulton, *Life in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Macmillan, c.1910), Vol 1, 216-229; modernized in *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* as “Two Sermons on Wives and Widows,” <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/bernardino-2sermons.html>>.

¹⁹ Marie de France, trans. Marcelle Thiébaux, *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), pp. 289-91

²⁰ St. Godelieve, trans. Jacqueline Murray and Abigail Young from Maurice Coens, “La Vie ancienne de Sainte Godelieve de Ghisteltes par Drogon de Bergues,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 44 (1926): 125-37, reprinted in Murray, *Love, Family...*, p.351

²¹ Trans. John C. Jacobs, *The Fables of Odo of Cheriton* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1985), p.153; reprinted in Murray, *Love, Marriage...* p.444.

²² see for example St. Godelieve, trans. Jacqueline Murray and Abigail Young from Maurice Coens, “La Vie ancienne de Sainte Godelieve de Ghisteltes par Drogon de Bergues,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 44 (1926): 125-37, reprinted in Murray, *Love, Family...*, p.350-59

- ²³ Trans. John F. Benton, *Self and Society in Medieval France. The Memoirs of Abbot Guibert of Nogent (1064?-c.1115)* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), pp. 63-75; reprinted in Murray, *Love, Marriage...*, p.295.
- ²⁴ Pope Gregory I. *Dialogues*. trans. Odo John Zimmerman, O.S.B., *The Fathers of the Church*, series. New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959, p.145-46.
- ²⁵ St. Jerome; reprinted in Murray, *Love, Marriage...*, p.289.
- ²⁶ Hali Meidhad in *Old and Middle English Anthology*, p.301
- ²⁷ *The Fifteen Joys of Marriage*, reprinted in Murray, *Love, Marriage...*, p.324.
- ²⁸ Robert Fossier, *Peasant Life in the Medieval West*, trans. Juliet Vale (Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1988), p.11
- ²⁹ Ibid. p.84-85
- ³⁰ St. Bernardino of Siena, trans. Ada Harrison, *Examples of San Bernardino* (London: Gerald Howe, 1926); reprinted in Murray, *Love, Marriage...*, p.315.
- ³¹ Symeon Metaphrates, *The Life of St. Matrona of Perge*. trans. by Khalifa Bennasser in *Gender and Society in Early Byzantine Monasticism: A study of the phenomenon of female ascetics in male monastic habit with translation of the life of St. Matrona*, (Ph.D Dissertation, Rutgers University, 1984) pp.118-154; reprinted in *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/matrona.html>>
- ³² Thomas Wright, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, Vol. I, (London: Trubner and Co., 1884) p.88; reprinted in Roy C. Cave and Herbert H. Coulson, *A Sourcebook for Medieval Economic History* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1965) pp.46-7.
- ³³ Bede, *Life and Miracles of St. Cuthbert*, trans. J.A. Giles in *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, Everyman's Library 479, (London: J.M. Dent; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1910) 286-249; reprinted in *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/bede-cuthbert.html>>
- ³⁴ Quoted in Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992) p.30
- ³⁵ Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, trans. by C. H. Talbot in *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany, Being the Lives of SS. Willibrord, Boniface, Leoba and Lebuin together with the Hodoepericon of St. Willibald and a selection from the correspondence of St. Boniface*, (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954); reprinted in *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/willibald-boniface.html>>
- ³⁶ Dhuoda, trans. Marcelle Thiébaux, *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, p.164, 159
- ³⁷ "The Salic Law" trans. by Gengler in "Germanische Rechtsdenkmaeler," p. 267; reprinted in *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School* <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/medieval/salic.htm>>
- ³⁸ Pope Gregory I, *Dialogues*, p.143
- ³⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*. trans. Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin Books, 1974, p.296.
- ⁴⁰ Radegund of Poitiers, "The Fall of Thuringia," lines 15-30, trans. Marcelle Thiébaux, *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, p.96
- ⁴¹ Pope Gregory I. *Dialogues*. p.11
- ⁴² Trans. Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000) lines 2444-2451, pp.165-67
- ⁴³ Sulpitius Severus, *On the Life of St. Martin*; from *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*, Volume 11 (New York: 1894); reprinted in *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* <<http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/npnf2-11/sulpitiu/lifemart.html>>