

The Common Era

I know for a fact, in any case, that no priest will ever speak well of wives or even of women. Unless they are saints, of course, when they don't really count as female

(from the Wife of Bath's prologue, Chaucer, 2009, p. 162)

Early Christianity

Christianity's early insistence on gender equality, on wives being treated honourably, and the church's practical compassion for the disadvantaged attracted converts from traditional Roman religion (Armstrong, 1993). So much so, that the first two centuries of the Common Era (CE) were marked by waves of persecution of Christians who could not compromise their faith to comply with the fundamental requirements of Roman citizens: That they demonstrate their allegiance through sacrifice to the gods from whom Rome took its authority, and recognise the Emperor's divinity. The persecution stopped only when the first Christian emperor, Constantine I, legislated religious tolerance throughout the Roman Empire in 313 CE.

Within the emerging Christian church, there was a variety of interpretations of Christ's reported teachings, as became apparent with the discovery of the Gnostic texts in 1945. These texts continued much of the Goddess tradition, although their deity was androgynous, and women could participate fully in the Gnostic church (Baring & Cashford, 1991; Pagels, 1988). In the Gospel of Mary, there is an exchange between Mary Magdalene and the disciple Peter that portends the eventual prevailing of the patriarchal church over the feminine. In the text, Mary reports a vision in which Christ appeared to her. First Andrew then Peter doubt that He would favour a woman over them, Peter asking "Did he really speak privately with a woman (and) not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?" (Baring & Cashford, 1991, p. 633). Matthew accuses Peter of treating women as adversaries, a perception expressed earlier by Mary when she had spoken of his hatred of women to Jesus.

Christ's close association with, and lack of discrimination towards, women had given them early freedom to take their share of prophecy and teaching. Further, Christ's dictum that to be His disciple is to leave family behind (e.g., see Matthew 10:34-37) gave women the courage to do just that with many taking vows of celibacy to better serve their god. It may also have been that the adoption of a chaste life was highly desirable for women repelled by the social milieu of the times (McNamara, 1985). Celibacy offered Christian women opportunity to map their own direction, free from patriarchal governance and from Roman society.

Such was its appeal that “women in particular had to be counselled against adopting the virgin life out of hatred of marriage rather than the proper reason of religious devotion. The virginal life unequivocally entailed a mission beyond the sexual and procreative service of men” (McNamara, 1985, p 56). The growing importance of a chaste life to Christian dogma eventually saw acceptance of virginal orders, particularly as men began adopting the unmarried life as necessary for their ministry. Celibacy attained the status of being closest to God, ranked into a hierarchical order of lifelong virgins over those who assumed chastity from baptism, and over those who maintained a chaste marriage, a not improbable circumstance within the new definition of marriage that saw a couple joined together by mutual consent in God’s service (McNamara, 1985).

By the second century CE, there were communities of consecrated virgins, actively preaching and ministering in the public sphere. This adoption of an autonomous independent life caused much suspicion among an increasingly misogynistic clergy who began, through reinterpretation of the Gospels and other revelations, to limit the range of activities appropriate for Christian women (Vidén, 1997). Increasingly, they were relegated to support roles in the church, and their status returned to one of subjection to men. In families, this meant to the male head of the household; in religious orders, the women were termed brides of Christ and were subject to the male clergy who saw themselves as Christ’s representatives on Earth (McNamara, 1985).

By the fourth century, Gnostic teachings were excluded from the orthodox Christian church and much of the early progressive social justice ideology had given way to institutional discourse (Armstrong, 1993). Accepted dogma was that argued by the unmarried Fathers of the Church, men such as Tertullian (155-222CE), Jerome (345-420CE) and Augustine (354-430CE), whose advocacy of a chaste life, ascription of blame for the world’s ills to Eve’s original sin of curiosity, and determination that all women should atone for Eve’s behaviour laid the foundations of the misogyny still identifiable in today’s Christianity (S. Bell, 1980).

Some of the rhetoric was as objectionable as that of Classical Athens and Rome. For example, Tertullian recommended that women always dress as though mourning and repenting Eve’s sin, which introduced death to the world. By extension, all women, representing Eve, were responsible for Christ’s death (Rogers, 1980) and were loathsome. A reputedly more moderate Father, John Chrysostom, is quoted, from a letter to a wavering monk, “... if you consider what is stored up inside (a woman’s) beautiful eyes, and that straight nose, and the mouth and the cheeks, you will affirm the well-shaped body to be

nothing else than a white sepulchre; the parts within are full of so much uncleanness” (Rogers, 1980, p. 86). Armstrong (1993) describes Jerome’s letters as teeming with arguably deranged loathing of women.

The Middle Ages

As Christianity began its expansion to Britain, so, too, does our attention as we move from the Mediterranean to Northern Europe in pursuit of the history of Western thought about women’s independence. Antipathy of the orthodox Church to sexual expression saw, at the beginning of the fifth century CE, the formula “virgin-widow-spouse” become the exemplar for social relations. This formula, applicable to both women and men as a moral compass guiding them to salvation, was dominant for the next 800 years during which time marriage was tolerated as the only avenue for sexuality, itself accepted as inevitable but an affront to piety. Theologians of the time calculated that the three moral categories attracted 100-, 60- and 30-fold rewards, respectively, in heaven (Jussen, 2002). Such quantification of reward and penalty seems to have been typical of the time. For example, the Penitentials of Theodore (archbishop of Canterbury in the second half of the seventh century) advises carefully calibrated penances for an range of sexual practices (McCarthy, 2004), unnerving in their being detailed by an ecclesiastic. Of interest to this discussion, Theodore also attended to marital matters, among which it is clear that single women were not to be married against their will.

Possibly because of their Celtic antecedents, it was not unusual for women to take leading roles in Anglo-Saxon England. The cult of the Virgin, reminiscent of the Athenian cult of the Mother of the Gods, developed in England by the middle of the seventh century. Communities of women inhabited quite powerful monasteries, some double houses that were also home to male clerics, headed by an abbess invariably of noble birth (Leyser, 1995). The monastic life in Anglo-Saxon times was not exclusively of prayer and good works. Core business was the conversion of pagans to Christianity and administration of Church. As well, there were pastoral and estate responsibilities, the latter reminiscent of the Mesopotamian *é-Bau* three millennia earlier. The women came to the monasteries from a variety of backgrounds. Some were dedicated while very young by their families, some were unmarried daughters surplus to family requirements, some chose the religious life of their own accord, some preferred the cloisters to betrothal or marriage, some wanted to maintain control of their own property or the power and influence they had enjoyed as wives of now dead royal men.

This situation was not to last. A confluence of factors brought the power and influence of the monasteries and their abbesses to an end.

These factors are suggested to include the demise of the double house amidst accusations of residents' impiety and sexual co-habitation; changes in social attitudes accompanied by concomitant changes to inheritance laws that brought no advantage by entrusting family estates to women; the influence of the European Carolingian reforms that removed women's claims to ministry and reverted to Paul's advice that women's regular entry to a state of physical impurity prevented them satisfying clerical obligations; changes to taxation and other civil responsibilities that removed exemption status from monasteries; and, from the ninth century, the vulnerability of isolated settlements and their female inhabitants to marauding Vikings (Foot, 2000).

Little is known about the lives of laywomen in Anglo-Saxon times. What records there are relate to the aristocracy, influenced by the church and, by definition, are of exceptional women. While there are inheritance records purporting to be evidence of women's independence, it is suggested that in fact the testatrixes are widows enacting their father's or husband's instructions (Crick, 1999). This may be a perspective refracted through twentieth century lens that doubts the possibility of women's social independence despite the evidence that women could and did manage property, and influence politics, with the authority afforded by their birth and subsequent status in the church. Marital status was elastic at all levels of society and, until the eleventh century, it appears even priests maintained concubines as well as more regularised relationships.

Post-Conquest, the beginning of the removal of women from public life gathered pace although domestically, particularly in peasant households, they were likely to act as joint managers of the economic unit (Leyser, 1995). Whereas in pre-Conquest England it was unremarkable for aristocratic women, including those in monasteries, to occupy positions of authority, in post-Conquest England the principle of primogeniture became the norm. This meant that power and property moved to the firstborn son on his father's death, or to the male guardian of a daughter where there was no son. Any power available to women was through their male relatives (Leyser, 1995). They commonly assumed an intermediary role between subjects and the lord or king analogous to that of the Virgin Mary between people and their god or, millennia earlier, between the Canaanite Goddess Asherah and Yahweh.

Some protections were enshrined in laws such as the Magna Carta (Gies & Gies, 1987; McCarthy, 2004). Daughters and widows could not be married without their consent, although an heiress and her property could be bestowed by the king, in consultation with his barons, to a strategically useful marriage. Fines were levied on abductors of unwilling women and rapists, commuted to imprisonment if offenders lacked the financial wherewithal to pay. While a wife was endowed with at least one

third of her husband's property on marriage, she had no control over its management and had to negotiate access to it with his heirs on her husband's death. Re-marriage, criminal activity or adultery could see her lose any claim to it whatsoever.

Women continued to enter monasteries, supported by Christian literature of the time that encouraged the abandonment of family to better serve God (Beach, 2002). Nunneries maintained their wealth and prestige, albeit with reduced political influence, and continued to be managed by aristocratic abbesses (Leyser, 1995). Echoing their earlier Christian foremothers, renunciation of procreative responsibilities allowed medieval religious women to become more like a man in theological eyes, eschewing the feminine domestic domain. This was doubtless highly desirable when luminaries such as Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century taught that, individually, "woman is defective and misbegotten" (Bell, 1973, p. 122) although necessary for procreation. Her subjugation was determined to be natural, both to best serve men and for self-improvement through learning from man's inherent rationality and wisdom.

During the Middle Ages, the "virgin-widow-spouse" formula gradually shrunk from its fundamental role as a general social compass for spiritual and moral aspiration to becoming a narrow descriptive classification just of women (Jussen, 2002). In classical Athens, *virgin* had a range of meanings that included a girl, a concubine, a wife not yet a mother, an elderly woman without a child or husband (Viitanieni, 1997). In Anglo-Saxon England, it had included married women latterly come to Christ and men who rejected the secular life for the celibate spiritual but, by the thirteenth century, virginity was understood to mean women's sexual celibacy, generally that of a young girl (Jussen, 2002). Some of the early Christian virgin martyrs who attracted widespread adoration in medieval times had, in fact, been married and/or mothers at the time of their martyrdom but were discursively re-constructed, as was the Virgin Mary, through extensive theological debate, to a state of physical purity (Resnick, 2000; Salih, 2001). Such re-construction brings to mind the goddesses of pre-Christianity, and the Great Goddess Herself, who achieved maternity through parthenogenesis. Noteworthy is the cult of the Virgin, the most dominant expression of medieval Christianity, that was mirrored, to a lesser degree, by the cult of the Lady in chivalric literature (Power, 1973). It has been argued that the Virgin and the Lady were two sides of the same coin, a patriarchal idealisation of the feminine that simultaneously created unachievable heights against which women were measured and which elevated them out of the worldly public sphere (Bloch, 1991). Saints had the same function as the deities of antiquity, becoming purpose-specific patrons for the range of human endeavour.

Female saints often had powers similar to earlier goddesses for family and domestic affairs. Pamphlets in the late Middle Ages commonly taught approved family functioning through the example of the Virgin, her mother, Anne, and her grandmother, Emerentia (Wiesner, 2000), a triad that references the triple aspect of the Great Goddess.

There was a range of texts promoting the virginal life for women in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. These included the Katherine Group of devotional texts that argued that marriage is a descent from a state of autonomy and communion with God, harming women both financially and emotionally (Hassel, 2002). The popularity of the virginal, devotional life for women of this period may be understood as constructing a third gender (Salih, 2001), the performance of which was quite distinct from the conventional, domestic feminine. This social stance paralleled that brought by the Gregorian Reforms in the eleventh century that confirmed compulsory celibacy of the male Christian clergy as a prerequisite for spiritual leadership. While virginity continued to be highly valued and fiercely protected in young women who might be expected to make a good marriage, cultural attitudes towards older secular virgins were exposed in medieval literature where this category of woman was ridiculed as being old, barren and useless (Bernau, 2007). Continuing the Hippocratic tradition of localising women's identity to their procreative function, medical opinion reinforced ideological negativity towards the older virgin through its authoritative descriptions of her physical, mental and physiological dysfunction that both explained and predicted her unmarried state.

For medieval laywomen, the category of widow held the most promise of relative independence (Hanawalt, 1992). Freed from the legal status of *femme couverte*, a "covered woman", a component of her husband's person, she became *femme sole*, enabling her to determine distribution of her assets through a will, trade as a business woman, claim her dower and her share of her husband's goods and chattels, head her own household, own and manage property, and litigate to protect her property and entitlements (Barron, 1994; Stretton, 1999). Widows would inherit their husband's business, including his tools of trade, sometimes on condition they stayed single or re-married within the trade (Abram, 1973), which was often a condition of Guild membership for which only wives were eligible as associates in some Guilds. If her husband had been a freeman, she was entitled at his death to freedom of the city, with rights to carry on a trade and engage apprentices, and to escape tolls. A woman with *femme sole* status could also become a Justice of the Peace by Royal Commission (Leyser, 1995). This range of possibilities was more likely to apply to widows of the emerging bourgeoisie whose husbands had acquired assets through their trade or profession.

At the time of the Magna Carta, widows were required to leave their husband's house within 40 days of his death, allowing his successor free occupation (McCarthy, 2004). From the late thirteenth century, land could be held in jointure so that it passed to widows at their husband's death (Gies & Gies, 1987; Leyser, 1995). This resulted in some peasant widows controlling significant amounts of land. They were free to expand or sell their holdings, to exclude children from full succession or to transfer part or all of their property via their heir to a third party (Bennet, 1992). It should be noted that local conditions created different entitlements; for example, in parts of England a peasant widow could keep her holding only if she remarried by the first anniversary of her husband's death (Leyser, 1995) otherwise she was entitled to only her dower of a third (the conventional inheritance was a third each to the widow, the children, and the church for the good of the deceased's soul) (Hanawalt, 1992).

At least 10% of medieval English households were headed by widows (Leyser, 1995). Re-marriage was less attractive for widows with inherited wealth or other means of self-support and many chose to live independent lives (Barron, 1994; Bennet, 1992), a circumstance that the above requirement to remarry or lose their property was, presumably, designed to address. As in previous times, aristocratic widows were more likely to again be a tool for strategic family advancement through marriage. An alternative to remarriage could be sought through taking a vow of chastity and entering a convent or remaining in the secular community as a vowess (Leyser, 1995). Again, as in earlier historical times, there is evidence that women bequeathed property to other women, sometimes to friends or valued servants outside the family structure, and a surprising number chose not to be buried with husbands (Barron, 1994).

Poor widows had to support themselves by any means possible including re-marriage or seeking public charity (Schen, 2001). Because this meant financial cost to the parish, civic fathers actively sought employment for poor widows, especially those with children. Hospitals in the Middle Ages offered a broad range of services including poor relief where widows might find refuge, accommodation and employment (Leyser, 1995).

Contrary to their range of roles and responsibilities that could be observed in everyday life, discourse about widows' lives revealed in plays, sermons, jokes and literature ridiculed a feminine caricature (Carlton, 1978). From this perspective, loss of a husband's control created a woman who was immodest, lewd, promiscuous and sexually rapacious (Carlton, 1978; Mirrer, 1992; Stretton, 1999), pathetic in her desire for a husband. Yet the evidence is that it was the vast majority of widowers who re-

married, and more quickly, after bereavement than widows (Bennet, 1992; Pelling, 2001). Widows were more likely to stay independent, particularly if their circumstances allowed adequate means of financial self-support.

A common theatrical plot was that of an unscrupulous young man preying on a widow to gain access to her property. This was understood to be a valid strategy for male advancement (Brodsky, 1980), with entertainment value attached to the widow's worldly experience depriving her new husband of his reward through quarantining her assets from his reach, and achieving domestic dominance (I. Clark, 2001). Carlton (1978) argues that discursive denigration of widows in the Middle Ages reflected men's fear of women independent of male control, of being posthumously cuckolded and of their own mortality contrasted with women's comparative longevity. He also introduces notions of projection, in this case of men's own sexual and anarchic urges on to independent, mature women.

The same might be thought of the characterisation of women in *The Canterbury Tales*, from the fourteenth century. Peter Ackroyd, the twenty-first century translator of this epic work, notes the "casual misogyny and equally casual anti-Semitism" (Ackroyd, 2009, p. xvi) of the times although the anti-cleric bias is also very evident. While young, virginal women generally receive gallant comment, the older sexually experienced woman is as worldly as her male peers. According to the Wife of Bath, a mythical knight saved himself from death by answering to the question "what do women want" that their primary wish is to dominate their husband and lovers. The Wife herself illustrated the point by narrating her strategies to achieve dominance over her five husbands. Nonetheless, Chaucer allowed the women in the *Tales* an agency that was not apparent in the political and religious discourse of the time. Shakespeare, over a century later, also allowed his female characters a role in public discourse and a sense of the ways in which their lives were circumscribed although, in both corpora, these were very much in the minority to the masculine.

The high point of the Middle Ages for English women was the century after the Black Death until the late fifteenth century. Low population growth, coupled with recession, required greater female participation in paid employment, a corollary of which was their reluctance to relinquish financial independence and to become more discriminate in their choice of marriage partner (Kowaleski, 1999). Some historians cite a slightly earlier period (1100-1300 CE) as a time "when peasant women came into their own" (Leyser, 1995, p. 150), their domestic influence associated with the introduction of hearths into their houses from which most of the tasks needed to support the household

were managed. The functional and spiritual importance of fire is redolent of the Olympian Hestia's responsibilities for hearth, architecture, the home and the state, the fundamental core of human civilisation. While not, perhaps, elevating the peasant woman to goddess status, her importance to the household's economy was unquestionable.

The subsequent economic stress that brought greater employment opportunity to independent women saw urban populations swell as people migrated from the country in search of work. A significant proportion of migrants were always-single women (singlewomen), the majority of whom entered the service of the growing middle and established upper classes (Leyser, 1995). In some centres, authorities discouraged singlewomen's independent living (Froide, 1999; Peters, 1997; Thomas, 1973), demanding that those aged less than 40 years be in service until they married or live in the house of "an honest person" who could vouch for their character and behaviour. Women defying this requirement were prosecuted, sometimes imprisoned, and exiled from the town. Official marginalisation of independent women excluded many of those outside the virgin-wife-widow trinity from official records, so that demographic statistics of the period must be compiled now by extrapolation rather than from the historical record. Noting that there was no source of demographic information about them prior to the fourteenth century, Kowaleski (1999) reports that a poll tax taken in England in 1377 records 29.9% of the population aged 14 years and older were singlewomen, a baseline figure given that many evaded paying the tax. An increasing range of sources has allowed an estimation that 30-40% of women in late medieval England had not married, possibly because of the economic leverage offered for economic independence by demand for their labour (Beattie, 2007) as well as fluctuation in the pool of possible spouses. They supported themselves as labourers in country estates and in commercial enterprises, such as brewing and textile work in towns (Power, 1973), even as money lenders (Bennet, 1992).

Widows and singlewomen of the aristocratic class could be found in nunneries, affording them "as brides of Christ a dignity greater than that which they would have attained as brides of men" (Power, 1973, p. 167). This alternative became available to bourgeois women as that class grew but the cost of entry, equivalent to a dowry, prohibited a nun's life for women of lower socio-economic status who instead joined together in lay sisterhoods (Leyser, 1995; Power, 1973).

Marital status shaped women's lives in the Middle Ages, as at other times. While wives were totally dependent on their husbands for identity and standing, they had some material and social benefits unavailable to other women. As noted above, widows were perhaps the most fortunate

sector of the female population but singlewomen, particularly without family support, could be in a parlous situation (Bennet & Froide, 1999).

Towards the end of the era, during the transition to industrialisation, many of the occupations previously available to singlewomen, such as brewing and weaving, disappeared as mechanised automation replaced small scale production (Leyser, 1995). Spinning continued to be the exclusively feminine occupation it had always been, particularly among women disadvantaged by poverty, infirmity or age (Pelling, 2001). Many independent women were included in the Poor Rolls of the time, and many turned to petty crime or prostitution to survive (Hanawalt, 1986; Thompson, 1993).

Attitudes towards singlewomen ranged between indifference and hostility. As with widows, aging always-single women were subjects of ridicule in sixteenth century song, although younger women yet to marry received a more positive press (Bennet & Froide, 1999). *Singlewoman* could be used interchangeably with *prostitute* (Karras, 1999), possibly because economic desperation drove some women to this means of self-support. Women in service were increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation in their employer's household as alternative employment options disappeared (Leyser, 1995). Marginalisation of women outside the virgin-wife-widow triad grew commensurate with their economic deprivation. There was no place in the moral texts of the day for a non-commercially sexually active singlewoman. She was termed a prostitute, understood to take all comers, driven by greed as well as lust (Karras, 1999).

Discussion of independent women in the Middle Ages cannot pass without mention of the witch hunts that killed so many of them, perhaps millions across Europe (Williams & Adelman, 1978). In continental Europe, the Roman Catholic Inquisition was the driving force, misogynistically addressing issues of heresy and guided by the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the procedural handbook described as "one of the most morally obtuse and pornographically obsessive works" ever written (Rosen, 1991, p. 12). Accompanying the witch craze was the return of Lilith to Western consciousness, leader of the succubi who corrupted men and sucked young children in their sleep (Williams and Alderman, 1978).

In England, witch trials were secular, most held in the highly volatile, unpredictable Elizabethan times (Thompson, 1993) that saw massive political, economic, religious, climatic and social transition (Rosen, 1991; Williams & Adelman, 1978). Elizabeth herself was reluctant to institute witch-hunts, being more concerned about the use of divination to subvert her rule than its potential to enable consorting with the devil. However, there were periods of intensified prosecutions in the later reign of King James (P. Stewart & Strathern, 2004). Part of the problem was

the population growth and harsh capitalism brought by the above transitions that saw greater social division and poverty (J. Sharpe, 2001).

While some of those accused of witchcraft were male, the great majority were women, thought to be more prone to witchcraft due to their inherently weaker moral and intellectual abilities and innate corruptibility (Williams & Adelman, 1978). The stereotypic English witch was a poor, lonely, unprotected, elderly woman, (Rosen, 1991; J. Sharpe, 2001; P. Stewart & Strathern, 2004; Williams & Adelman, 1978), generally with a reputation for malicious and often unchaste behaviour, denounced for causing personal harm to her accuser rather than for witchcraft *per se* or heresy. A common example was that of a poor, elderly woman asking her wealthier neighbour for perhaps food, money or odd jobs. Her angry reaction on refusal might include threats or curses that were remembered if misfortune was later visited on the neighbour who then accused the woman of witchcraft. It was women habitually inclined to respond to frustration with verbal insult or curses who were likely to be accused, women whose behaviour was considered an affront to notions of femininity (P. Stewart & Strathern, 2004).

A witch commonly had a familiar, a devil in the form of a domestic pet, that she fed from a witch's mark somewhere on her body. By the late seventeenth century, the mark was located on her pudenda or anus (J. Sharpe, 2001). One can only imagine the terror and humiliation experienced by these women - or perhaps their rage and imprecations - when stripped naked, shaved and examined intimately for physical evidence of their pact with Satan. The searches were undertaken by women, perhaps matrons of poor institutions or members of neighbourhood women's juries, who had the authority to strip-search women suspected of illicit sexual behaviour, illegitimate pregnancies or infanticide, or witchcraft (Gowing, 2003). This surveillance role continued until the eighteenth century when it was rendered obsolete by the public authority assumed by poor law administration, charitable institutions and workhouses.

In England the activities of the self-proclaimed 'Witchfinder General', Matthew Hopkins, helped to make the English witch hunts synonymous with Puritanism, with consequences for women in the New World (Williams & Adelman, 1978). Certainly Protestantism was just as rigidly misogynistic as the Catholicism against which it fought as evidenced by John Knox's 1558 *The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* that argued the perversion of nature that was women in authority. Thompson (1993) describes a drastic deterioration of women's position after the Civil War with gendered social segregation intensifying prejudice and ill-feeling against women, possibly in part a reaction to the challenge to patriarchal structures brought by women's

greater prominence in the spiritual sects that sprang up during that time (Thomas, 1973).

From the beginning of the Middle Ages, the Church led discourse about the meaning of marriage, partially as a strategy to enforce a celibate clergy and partly to resolve debate about the role of sex in marriage (Duby, 1994; Resnick, 2000). While the ideal Christian marriage was spiritual and celibate, there was reluctant acceptance that sexual desire existed and the best containment option was to limit it to married couples, understanding that its purpose was procreation, not pleasure. By the end of this period, Catholicism was enumerating God's purpose in marriage as (i) the friendship and mutual support of the conjugal pair, (ii) procreation, and (iii) avoidance of lust and fornication (Leites, 1982). Other theologians, including the Puritans of recently Protestant England, were arguing for the inclusion of sexual pleasure as a component of a good marriage. Marriage had become the ideological norm, reinforced with authoritative comment such as that by sixteenth century Dutch theologian, Erasmus, who asked whether there was anything more hateful than a contented bachelor (Leites, 1982), the possibility of contented single women perhaps not imaginable.

The family structure was the embodied economic, political, ideological and social representation of the state (Kazmierczak Manzione, 1996). So much so that the singlewoman Elizabeth I was reproached publicly for her failure to marry and to ensure Protestant succession to the throne (de la Torre, 2001). Underpinning this anxiety were not only concerns about the possible return of a Catholic monarch but also assumptions about women's need for spousal guidance and their inherent unsuitability for public life. Possibly to assuage these anxieties, Elizabeth added the *Homily on matrimony* to be preached at marriage ceremonies (Aughterson, 1995). The homily confirmed a woman's subjection to her husband, and that male authority is God-given (Stenton, 1973). Speculatively, Elizabeth's spinsterhood may well have been to avoid compliance with wifely deference to her husband's domination in the private and, unthinkable for a Queen with a strong sense of commitment to her destiny, public spheres (S. Bell, 1973).

It should be noted that, although they not uncommonly assumed responsibility for managing family affairs while their husbands were away at war, at sea or on business (Hanawalt, 1998; Power, 1973), the behaviour of wives and women in general was under constant surveillance, instruction and monitoring to ensure no threat to male privilege. Not only was her honour threatened if a woman ventured unescorted beyond her immediate environment, rape was a very real risk and marginalisation accompanied women who lived outside a respectable norm (Hanawalt, 1998).

Apart from Church dictate, there were many tracts to guide women's behaviour in the Middle Ages (Aughterson, 1995; Chamberlain, 2002; Mirrer, 1992). Foremost among these was Juan Luis Vives' *The instruction of a Christian woman*, first published in 1523 and translated into French, German, Italian and English from the original Latin (Aughterson, 1995). These texts covered all aspects of women's lives although, to twenty-first century eyes, they are rife with ambiguity and contradiction, and offered little guidance in situations in the real world outside those prescribed as ideal (Chamberlain, 2002).

Literature, too, offered moral guidance to women. Sir Philip Sidney, author of the Renaissance novel *Arcadia*, believed in the unique power of fiction to teach through modelling examples of proper behaviour and the consequences of its violation. The fact that these texts were authored to teach women their proper place and behaviours indicates a general failure by them to comply with patriarchal expectations.

The modern era

Based on Marriage Duty assessment figures, independent women were calculated to comprise at least one third of women in late seventeenth century England. This is likely to be the minimum calculable because always-single women aged from 25 years and widows did not pay the tax, and other adult single women could be listed as "daughter" or "child" of a male household head. Taking these circumstances into account and considering relevant data from other sources, it is possible that about half of all adult women at the time of the surveys in early modern England were unmarried (Froide, 2002).

The population of independent women in Europe rose in the seventeenth century, more so in urban areas (Kowaleski, 1999), as women moved from the country in search of work. The pool of potential husbands had diminished due to men's overseas migration in search of their fortunes, absence while fighting in the regular conflicts of the era, migration around the country in search of work, or their succumbing to infection and plagues to which they were more vulnerable than women (Spicksley, 2003). As well, the Elizabethan Poor Laws had made it more difficult for poor people to marry. Local parishes were responsible for supporting needy residents and, to reduce the burden, the clergy would refuse to marry migrants to the area who should be supported by their own parish or couples where the bride would bring minimal or no assets to help establish conjugal life (Spicksley, 2003). It is also possible that lifelong independence was a choice made by women who could take advantage of the economic opportunities available to them to provide for themselves.

Possibly in response to straitened economic times, families became reluctant to lose productive daughters or a bride portion to marriage (Peters, 1997), leading to eventual bequests, as parents died, that allowed domestic independence. As well, women married later partly because of the time it took to accumulate their marriage portion and some decided to use the money to support an independent rather than a married life. Spicksley (2003) draws attention to sixteenth century legalisation enabling interest to be levied on loans, noting a sharp increase in singlewomen's investment portfolios over the following century. She also notes that marriage was regularly parodied in popular culture - as it had been in the fourteenth century (Ackroyd, 2009) - concomitant with celibate life increasingly lauded for allowing service to the public good, undiverted by family demands.

That said, marriage was still the preferred path for women to tread and singlewomen *per se* were still the most disadvantaged women. Less likely than widows or impoverished men to receive poor relief (Hill, 1989), they were expected to be self-supporting within constraints that protested against and penalised their economic independence. Employment options privileged widows and wives, and heavier fees were imposed on the few singlewomen who did manage to begin businesses; confronted with these obstacles, most went into service (Froide, 1999).

It was in the seventeenth century that "spinster", referencing the occupation that had been exclusively women's for millennia, first appeared as an official demographic class, and the honorifics "Miss" and "Mrs" introduced as in/ter/dependent categories (Erickson, 1999). In the eighteenth century, "spinster" became conflated with the derogatory label "old maid" (Hufton, 1984) that signified ugliness, ill-nature, jealousy, nosiness, foolishness, and prudery simultaneously with lasciviousness (Bennet & Froide, 1999), and unrequited heterosexual desire (Lanser, 1999). Singleness again became problematic for social order and for individual women who were denigrated as morally deficient, helped in no small degree by cultural discourse over the century that reduced the virtuous and respectable self-sufficient singlewoman to a figure of ridicule (Lanser, 1999). This reversal of status for the celibate woman followed the 1549 Act allowing priests to marry, an ideological shift brought by the imposition of Protestantism as the prevailing religion in England (Davies, 1981) in which its clerics modelled proper family life.

The attack on the singlewoman/spinster may have been a patriarchal response to their increasing numbers and their threatening independence as they took advantage of the economic opportunities brought by increasing industrialisation and the growing middle class market that was out-sourcing some previously domestic production. Single women were now employed in many arms of the textile industry,

in factories, in formal education, trading in consumer and luxury goods, shop-keeping, investing and speculating as well as in their traditional spheres (Bennet & Froide, 1999; Lanser, 1999). Lanser (1999) goes further to argue that the main antagonism towards spinsters was their failure to reproduce the next generation at a time when population growth had stalled (Wrigley, 1981). Creating a workforce to both manufacture and consume the products of increasing mechanisation, and to populate and administer the developing empire was deemed vital to England's prosperity. As with women in previous ages, single women of independent means not uncommonly bequeathed property to younger single women (Froide, 2001), particularly to nieces but also to others with whom they had shared close friendships.

Working class spinsters continued to struggle in low paid jobs, sometimes clustering together for mutual financial support, or, as with their predecessors, turning to crime or prostitution to survive. Many older working class spinsters exploited their early training to become specialist maids (such as nannies, cooks, or housekeepers). The challenging financial times across the eighteenth century are thought responsible for an astonishing 25-30% rate of unmarried aristocratic daughters, suggested to be caused by the prohibitive costs of marriage portions at this time (Hufton, 1984).

Up to the eighteenth century, an estimated 14% of households were headed by independent women, most commonly by widows (Hufton, 1984). Perhaps braced by guidebook advice such as that of Vives' sixteenth century exhortations to remain chaste in isolation as though their husbands were still alive, widows in England continued their public life and were increasingly reluctant to remarry (Todd, 1999), particularly if they were women of means. Remarriage was strongly discouraged in Protestant England with widowhood a metaphor for affliction and loss. Salvation could be achieved through subsequent independent lives that enabled them to approach men's status, as had been the case for celibate women in earlier Christian times. Poor relief was relatively generous to the needy widow, but not to spinsters, as was her privileging in some districts for placement in available work (P. Sharpe, 1999). Yet this support was monitored closely, and likely to be withdrawn, if she were thought to have offended patriarchy's expectations about her work ethic and morals.

As well, companionate marriage was becoming ideologically desirable, in which context remarriage was a betrayal of the widow's first husband (Foyster, 1999). This discourse was apparent in literary sources that mocked and condemned spouses of multiple marriages (as had done the Roman Seneca centuries before). In this discourse, subsequent marriages were motivated by women's sexual insatiability, unlocked by

their first marriage, and by men's ambition for unearned material gain, rather than a quest for companionship.

There were two major contradictory discourses in texts promoting the new companionate marriage. One spoke about equitable domesticity and conjugal affection, the other reinforced patriarchal ideology through wifely subjection to her husband's authority (Davies, 1981). This second discourse caused some confusion for women whose religion taught that they were bound to follow both God's guidance as revealed through their conscience and their husband's direction. This confusion is suggested to manifest in behaviours that caused the plethora of corrective texts to be written (e.g., Chamberlain, 2002, Wiesner, 2000).

The notion of companionate marriage, however, brought adverse changes to women's financial security. Financial discussion by wives, including about their support if widowed, was thought to be mercenary, unfeminine and domestically disruptive (Erickson, 1999). Spouses were considered to be one person in law which, in reality, meant the husband's ownership of all marital property including his wife and her assets, management of which were lost to the marriage (Hill, 1989). On his death, the newly romanticised notions of marriage required lengthy periods of mourning during which the widow withdrew from public life. During this period, the marriage's resources were managed by a male guardian who controlled the family business, paying the widow an annuity (Stone, 1993) rather than allowing her access to the tools of trade that, in earlier times, would have enabled self-sufficiency (Botelho & Thane, 2001). Similarly, a husband's contribution to public life was, *ipso facto*, also his wife's, justifying her exclusion from independent agency (Wiesner, 2000), an exclusion extended, in anticipation, to the unmarried woman because it was expected that, at some point, she would be married.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw great agricultural reform that, coupled with population growth and increasing mechanisation, alienated many people from access to land to farm in their own right or to labour for others (Hill, 1989; Raven, 2004). By the late eighteenth century, migration from urban centre to centre was more common, along with desperate poverty, as people sought the means to survive. By the early nineteenth century, support for poor women was waning, sometimes limited to those in a workhouse or who were military widows (P. Sharpe, 1996). Perhaps linked to this movement of people from village to town, region to region, there were indications that the community control that had maintained order in previous times was losing its grip. Illegitimacy rates increased in England from about 1.5% to 5% across the century (Wrigley, 1981), paradoxically coupled with increased pressure on women to marry. Always-single women in

propertied families were stigmatised by attitudes ascribing social failure and shame to their relational status (Erickson, 1999). Hill (1989) notes that where there was no question of property or inheritance (i.e., in lower socio-economic populations) pre-marital chastity was of less importance than a couple's compatibility and fertility. The surveillance role previously undertaken by lay women over their neighbours disappeared, including that of midwives whose status decreased as men's authority over women's reproductive health increased (Gowing, 2003)

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the vast majority of women in England were employed in a wide variety of trades that were gradually lost to them through the gendering of occupations and work practice, driven by mechanised processes and the tightening economy (Hill, 1989; King, 2004). For the first time, women's monopoly on spinning was broken by the introduction of machinery which women were thought too weak and unskilled to operate. The model of the family economic production unit vanished, and competition for available employment saw women increasingly marginalised to low paid, unskilled work rather than being allowed to compete with men for household-supporting wages (Raven, 2004). Increasing dependence on men for survival saw a drop in the median marriage age across the eighteenth century, as marriage became women's major survival strategy. Indeed, the situation became so dire that, according to Hill (1989), by the end of the eighteenth century, women could exist only by marrying or prostituting themselves, which, in the circumstances, could be considered two sides of the same coin. Women continued to dominate poor relief, taking advantage where they could of new approaches that sought to facilitate self-sufficiency rather than on-going dependence on charity (King, 2004). Yet, also from the eighteenth century, women found a role to play in education, as governesses in private homes, as teachers in existing schools and as founders and principals of new ones (Hufton, 1984). Driven by exclusion from the means of self-support, it was spinsters and widows who were in the forefront of pressure for social change, who fought for inclusion in higher education and the professions, and in public life (Hill, 1989; Hufton, 1984).

A major feature of the nineteenth century was a dramatic increase in the number of unmarried women, due to the unavailability of suitable husbands through emigration, war, and unemployment. In 1861, 48.3% of the female population aged 20 and older was independent, including widows (Kranidis, 1999). The increase in the number of spinsters excited public concern about the surplus of women to patriarchy's need, and to the numbers of available marriageable men (M. Anderson, 1984; Hudson, 1995; Kranidis, 1999; Vicinus, 1985; Yeo, 2008). The most often cited discussion of the problem is that of public commentator, W. R.

Greg, in 1862. In his *Why are women redundant*, he identified the problem as the surplus of middle and upper class women, due to men's earlier emigration to the new colonies and to the women's reluctance to marry below their station. His recommended solutions were for the immediate shipping of 500,000 of the surplus women to the parts of the empire needing wives; and for those remaining in England to both lower their matrimonial sights and learn the skills of the women with besmirched reputations with whom England's bachelors were preferring to spend their time (Greg, 1862). With eerie similarity, Greg anticipated comments by an Australian twenty-first century public figure about the effects of male migration¹, making the same assumptions about the primacy of women's marital aspirations and men's inclination to avoid these if alternative arrangements for achieving sexual satisfaction were available.

Greg's migration recommendations were not totally original. From the late seventeenth century, independent women "of good behaviours, suitable as wives for soldiers and planters" (P. Sharpe, 2004, p. 64) had been actively encouraged by the East India Company to travel to India and wives already were joining husbands in the Empire's expansion. Migration was not a new concept for working class women who, as noted earlier, moved *en masse* from country to town in search of work as changes in agricultural technology and practice took the jobs previously available to them. Working class women had also been in the vanguard of emigration when prospects in England vanished further with increasing competition for the dwindling number of occupations. From the nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of women left Britain for the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the Cape of Good Hope, many with official assisted passage. This migration continued up until the 1930s when the number of women emigrating from the United Kingdom far exceeded that of men (Kranidis, 1999).

For the independent woman remaining in England, life could be grim. Previous early adoption by women of innovation and niche occupations gave way to a labour market gendered to privilege male status, prestige, and income (Hudson, 1995). While working class women were in demand for the low-paying, low-skilled occupations brought by industrialisation, or to domestic service, middle and upper class spinsters were confined to lives of financial dependence and marginalisation (Gordon & Nair, 2002; Hudson, 1995). Paying positions they did secure were an extension of domestic roles that prepared them for work in education, nursing, offices, shops (although many had first to be taught

¹ KPMG partner, Bernard Salt, was quoted on page 1 of *The West Australian*, 27 July 2005, describing a 'man drought' caused by potential husbands leaving Australia to work overseas. "Men realise they don't have to commit and get to play the field, and the numbers are allowing them to get away with it," he said.

arithmetic), operating switchboards and sending telegrams. Caught between a rock and a hard place, even these aspirations to financial independence attracted disapproval for the middle-class spinster who was admonished that her employment cost that of somebody more worthy of the opportunity (Cooper, 2001; Vicinus, 1985). As in previous times, many always-single women came together in self-supporting communities, many of which were dedicated to women's successful independence through education and worthwhile employment.

Although religious practice dominated the life of the Victorian ruling classes, the 1851 census found large numbers of the working class were non-aligned to any church. It was possibly the confluence of reduced religious belief, limited marriage options, increasing agitation for social rights for women or simply economic independence that contributed to an increasing illegitimacy rate. Whatever the reasons, nearly half of all women who did marry were pregnant at the altar; commonly, working class women did not formalise their unions at all (Cooper, 2001). There is evidence that many women in the paid workforce chose maternity without marriage (Hudson, 1995).

Wives, albeit the epitome of idealised passive Victorian femininity, were in a similar dependent situation to their always-single sisters. Husbands continued to have total control over all property in the marriage thus ensuring wives lack of access to financial resources. Scientific discourse limiting women's potential to just the reproductive entered the public domain so that, for the good of the family and the Empire, their activities were restricted to the domestic (Hudson, 1995). Ironically, it was respectable society's distaste of the prurient reporting of those few cases that were presented for a divorce by Parliamentary Act, and criminal conduct litigation, that brought divorce within reach of those citizens who could prove adultery with the passing of the 1857 *Matrimonial Causes Act*. This was followed 25 years later with the *Married Woman's Property Act* (1882) that guaranteed wives control of their own property (Horstman, 1985).

As in previous times, widows enjoyed some privileges denied to spinsters and wives with a significant number operating *femme sole* in small business (Hudson, 1995). In a representative sample of Glaswegian households, Gordon & Nair (2002) found a rise in female-headed households from 23.0% to 40.0% between 1851 and 1891. Widows, who were also providing a home for a broad range of female and male family members, headed the great majority of these households.

From the mid-nineteenth century, women's voices were increasingly heard in the growing debates about social justice, culminating in the focussed agitation that achieved universal suffrage in the early twentieth century (some decades after its gradual introduction in

the colonies). Recognising the fundamental role of religion in validating social arrangements and women's subjugation, many feminists argued for reclamation of the feminine that had been lost in the transition from Catholicism to the Protestant faith as the official state religion. Darwin's evolutionary theories were applied to social organisation and notions of complementary feminine and masculine principles were promoted to legitimise women's claims to participate in public life. Around the end of the nineteenth century, an argument emerged from sociology that patriarchy had taken humanity as far as it was capable, requiring matriarchy to move it to a higher level (Yeo, 2008). Feminist opposition to the 1860s' Contagious Diseases Acts, that targeted female prostitutes (many of whom were refugees from failed marriages with no income-generating alternative) while ignoring their male clients, saw their repeal in the 1880s (Horstman, 1985).

After the 1857 divorce Act, a different discourse entered popular literature, one that reflected new expectations of conjugal happiness and admitted the misery that generations of wives had endured (Showalter, 1978). Anxieties about the incidence of fictional – and some factual – lethal poisonings of husbands contributed to the introduction of a Bill to control the sale of poisons. Discussion of marriage became the means by which much art and literature questioned prevailing social conditions (Kranidis, 1999). Prominent among these were John Stuart Mill's *The subjection of women* (1861), credited or vilified at the time for encouraging women's aspirations to independence and the vote (Cooper, 2001; Showalter, 1978). Wilkie Collins published *No name* (1862) in which he examined social identity and bourgeois morality through the responses of two sisters to their illegitimacy, suggesting that women were in greater need of protection from patriarchy and capitalism than from independence. George Gissing's *The odd women* (1893) dealt with the problems of spinsterhood and women's socio-economic dependence (Kranidis, 1999). Many Victorian women, including Florence Nightingale and Frances Power Cobbe, wrote polemics about the dangers of dependence for women. Others, such as Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, fictionalised representative characters to analyse related problems and their resolution (Dolin, 1997). Educationist and writer, Mrs William (Maria Georgina) Grey, published a pamphlet from her lecture *Old maids* to discuss class and gender stereotypes that labelled a spinster as being independent, honourable and honoured, or disagreeable, ridiculous and a laughingstock, depending on her financial resources (Kranidis, 1999).

In an opposing discourse, the establishment's fear of the independent woman surfaced in literature that demonised her. Not even the religious woman was immune to this backlash with narratives about

depraved convents alongside those of the home-wrecking prostitute, and the labelling as fallen women those who worked in factories and other low-income industry (Bernau, 2007). Undeterred, increasing numbers of women opted for independence and middle-class fertility rates declined (Showalter, 1978). Advice books that had extolled the benefits of marriage for women and their deportment within it began warning women against waiting too long for their prince to come and expecting too much from their husband once wed. There was also a flood of advice books for the independent woman, enjoining her to live lives of devout restraint, and, because of marriage's increasing unpopularity, social commentators warned against suggesting it was only one of many options for women (Vicinus, 1985).

The impetus for change that improved wives' legal status from the mid to the late nineteenth century also brought greater rights and opportunities for unmarried women. By the end of the century, living single attracted women who previously would have been denigrated for their domestic status (Horstman, 1985). Unthinkable just a few decades previously, there was public debate about the value of marriage, the acceptability of divorce, the empowerment for women of freely-chosen celibacy and the importance of friendship as a valid intimate relationship (Vicinus, 1985). The "new woman" of the 1890s, with her self-sufficiency and reluctance to marry, attracted epithets questioning her femininity and appearance (Cooper, 2001) as the ideological elites tried to protect their status. At the turn of the century, 45.5% of spinsters were in paid employment and women in general seemed on the cusp of full civil status (Vicinus, 1985). The "modern girl" of women's magazines was synonymous with progress, self-sufficiency, and independence (Tinkler, 1995). Women seemed to be approaching ascendancy.

Summary

This chapter began, as with the preceding one, by describing a time when women enjoyed independent participation in public life before patriarchal interests, validated by religious discourse, again asserted their dominance over the feminine. In our history of Western misogyny we moved to the Anglophone world, finding some evidence of women's autonomy in the first millennium CE. The second millennium enshrined primogeniture as a social organising mechanism that effected women's exclusion from equitable participation in political and civic affairs. Their participation in the workforce was subject to the economic demands of any period, and their claims to financial self-sufficiency were likely to be denied when male employment rates were threatened. At a domestic level, women's lives swung between the partnership necessary for the success of a family-based economic unit such as a trade or peasant farming and the elevation

of modern home-making to a career for women who were excluded from the mechanised world following the Industrial Revolution.

That is not to say that women were not in the paid workforce. Women have always sought, and taken every opportunity available to them to achieve, self-sufficiency. Their presence in the occupations available to them post-mechanisation was necessary, but “the working woman” attracted criticism from those who believed women’s destiny lay elsewhere.

The economic upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries caught women in a double bind. Employment opportunities were closing for them and the alternative, marriage, also became less likely. The pool of potential husbands had diminished due to increasing male migration in search of the work that was unavailable at home, making marriage impossible for legions of unemployed men. These circumstances eventually forced social change that enabled women’s entry to a broader range of employment opportunities and, as their independence grew, to political emancipation.

Here, we too will leave the Old for the New World, specifically to Australia where European colonisation began in 1788. European women’s experience in their new land did not begin well. In the next chapter, we will consider women’s experience of settlement on the other side of the world, and its legacy for Australian women in the twenty-first century.