The Portrayal of Marriage in *Miracula*

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In this paper I will look at the practical ways in which husbands and wives negotiated the daily demands of married life as these were portrayed in *miracula* or miracle stories of the central Middle Ages.¹ *Miracula* form a sub genre of medieval hagiography. They are narratives that describe the effects of the saints' intercessory power with God for miracles, usually concerned with the healing of the sick.² The clergy of monasteries and churches in charge of saints' relics collected stories of these saints' miracles and wrote them down as evidence for their saints' efficacy. Most of the evidence comes from eleventh- and twelfth-century Normandy, but I also draw on wider geographical material from France. Whereas most authors were men, primarily monks, and only exceptionally nuns, whose testimony relied on the stories they collected from the laity involved in the event perceived to have been miraculous. The miracle stories were collected in dossiers devoted to a particular saint, or a group of saints, in monastic houses such as Jumièges and St.Wandrille on the River Seine, St. Amand and St.Ouen at Rouen, Fécamp, St Pierre sur Dives, Le Bec and Mont Saint-Michel

¹ I am most grateful for the invaluable editorial advice from Sara McDougall, and for the astute comments and observations generously provided by the two anonymous readers.

² For miracle stories as valuable sources for medieval social life, see Pierre-André Sigal, 'Histoire et hagiographie. Les *miracula* aux XIe et XIIe siècles,' *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'ouest*, 87, 1980, 237-57 and his *l'Homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale (XIIe et XIIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1985); Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind. Theory, Record and Event, 1000-1215*, (n.p., 1982); Kathleen Quirk, 'Men, women and Miracles in Normandy, 1050-1150', *Medieval Memories. Men, Women and the Past 700-1300*, ed. Elisabeth van Houts (Harlow, 2001), 53-71; Simon Yarrow, *Saints and Communities. Miracle Stories in Twelfth-century England*, (Oxford, 2006); Rachel Koopmans, *Wonderful to relate. Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England*, (Philadelphia, 2011); Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton, 2013), 558-70.

as well as the cathedral of Coutances.³ They were read by monks and nuns themselves, but importantly they were aimed at lay audiences of the faithful, either through attendance of liturgical services in monastic churches or cathedrals, through story telling and preaching. As evidence for marriage on the ground, so the speak, the stories are important especially for the incidental detail they contain about the domestic setting of the medieval lay household of the nuclear family. What makes the *miracula* such an attractive group of text for our purpose, the gendered discussion of married life in miracle stories, is their setting in a time that Christian marriage was a topic of acute pastoral interest for the Church. What I hope to show is a development over time from seemingly unproblematic depiction of married couples in nuclear households to opening up a world that shows courting couples and the formation of marriage at the heart of moralistic tales known as *exempla*. The gendered interaction between the married partners is my prime concern.⁴

However, a word of caution is required. The use of *miracula* as a source for social history due to their seemingly vivid vignettes of daily life and ordinary people, is never unproblematic. Are these rhetorical exercises depicting invented people with imaginary illnesses, are they propaganda exercises shoehorning real life observations into template like narratives or are they faithful reportage by journalistic clergy with a deft hand at daily sketches? On this scale I think that a combination of the latter two comes closest to what I think are representations of people in real life circumstances whose experiences of traumatic situations are narrated for the mutual benefit of the church and lay community in awe of the divine action through their home saints. Yet, they remain rhetorical exercises aimed at persuasion and conviction and the better the author is at vivid description the more chance

³ They are cited in the footnotes throughout this article.

⁴ Quirk, 'Men, women and miracles, 70-71.

there was for the audience to be impressed by the saint's miracle working powers.⁵ Historians have used *miracula* for information about medical care and illness, mothers as carer for her family and especially for her children. As a result *miracula* have been mined for the history of medicine, religions and childhood, although interestingly not - as far as I am aware - specifically for medieval married life.⁶ The modern study of *miracula* owed much to the study of a slightly later medieval genre, the *exemplum*, or short moralistic story, popularised by Cistercian and Mendicant preachers from the late twelfth century onwards. These narratives too were often set amongst the laity for whom the moral story needed to be accessible and recognisable as episodes of 'real' life with which the audience could identify themselves. Whereas miracle stories, my prime evidence here, were written primarily to promote the efficacy of a particular saint, relic or shrine, the stories underlying them, and the use made of the written and oral record promoted a moral message not dissimilar to that of the later *exempla*. For this reason I include on occasion the latter where appropriate. The authors of both *miracula* and *exempla* were predominantly, though by no means exclusively, male celibate men. As Catherine Rider has argued for *exempla*, the male authorship raises important questions about gender perceptions of the lay men and women whose religious experience was at the heart of the narrative.⁷ Given the central role of married women as wives and mothers for the proper moral and religious conduct of their husbands, children and other dependants, they were the specific target of the stories' authors. The same is true, of course, for the men who collected and composed *miracula* stories.

⁵ Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, 9-46 is especially strong on the development of many miracle stories from oral testimony to written record; see also more briefly Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Great Things?* 564-6.

⁶ Ronald C. Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered children in Medieval Miracles* (New York, 1997); Didier Lett, *L'enfant des miracles. Enfance et société au Moyen Âge (XIIe-XIIIe siècles)*, Paris 1999; Barbara H. Hanawalt, 'Medievalists and the Study of Childhood', *Speculum* 77 (2002) 440-60 at 446-50 and 454-6 (mostly for later Middle ages).

⁷ Catherine Rider, 'Elite and popular superstitions in the exempla of Stephen of Bourbon', *Studies in Church History* 42 (2006) 78-88. For the genre of *exempla*, see Claude Bremond and Jacques le Goff, *L'Exemplum, Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental*, 40 (Turnhout, 1982).

My argument is that - as in the case of *exempla* stories - *miracula* were written as a clerical prop to illustrate to the laity, especially the women, that invoking a saint's support, by praying at his shrine, paid off in tangible dividends in the form of healing the sick and restoring health to those in near death situations. In particular, the wives' pious behaviour might be condemned as subversive and disobedient or indeed ridiculed by disproving or sceptical husbands, nevertheless the *miracula* authors invariably showed that wives' faith in divine grace should be given priority over earthly obedience to husbands. The male clergy actively provided lay wives with moral arguments in their dialogue with husbands as to how to behave in a moment of crisis. In what follows I will discuss several themes that are pertinent to my analysis: i. Authority and obedience, ii. Body language, iii. Collaboration, iv. Love and affection, v. Marriage as an institution.

i. Authority and obedience

The Christian society that produced the *miracula* and the married couples they portrayed was, like Jewish and Muslim society, deeply patriarchal giving men authority over women.⁸ Husbands were the head of the family and household and women were their subordinates. Canon law stipulated that within the household the married man held all authority over his wife, children and other members and that he was responsible for the exercise of discipline. Fundamental was the Christian notion expression by Apostle Paul: 'Wives submit yourselves to your own husband as you do to the Lord (Ephesians 5: 22)' on the grounds that 'the husband is the head of the wife (Ephesians 5:23, I Corinthians 11:3) ,

⁸ Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, 'Observations sur la logique sociale des conflits dans la parenté au Moyen Âge', *La parenté déchirée: Les luttes intrafamiliales au Moyen Âge*, ed. M. Aurell, Histoires de famille. La parenté au Moyen Âge, 10 (Turnhout, 2010), 413-29.

sentiments rehearsed by successive authorities until being embedded in Gratian's *Decretum*.⁹ Thus Christian society was built on the premise that men had the upper hand in deciding how to maintain order in their households and that women had to abide by their husbands' decisions. Since the nuclear family was seen as a microcosm of society at large any challenge to a husband's authority was seen as a challenge to the wider social order that needed to be curbed immediately. Perceived disobedience to male authority by wives to husbands was the most obvious area for marital tension. Male violence as punishment for perceived female insubordination was the one most often surfacing in medieval narratives, though interestingly not very often in *miracula* (see below). In an unequal power relationship it was the man who had the right to identify situations as disputes or conflicts and seek a solution. In Christian society the gender relationship of the couple, man and woman, nevertheless was subordinated to the overarching authority of God and his divine commands. As we shall see, the gender specificity of male authority and female submissiveness might be seen to be subverted in the face of a higher authority that was able to 'downgrade' the husband's power and 'upgrade' his wife's.¹⁰

In ordinary day- to-day life women were required to be subject to their husband's will and do as they were told. Subservience and obedience are omnipresent in literature in scenarios that vary from women willingly doing as they were told to disagreeing in various degrees. One domestic aspect of husbands' attitudes to their wives is the men's assumption that their wives were expected to tend to their every need. This is a timeless aspect of marital life until well into the twentieth century. It is already in evidence in mid-ninth century

⁹ Ephesians 5:22-24 *Mulieres viris suis subditae sunt* and *caput autem mulieris vir*; Gratian, C. 33, q. 5, cc. 12-19 already contained in the first recension, see Anders Winroth, *The Making of Gratian's Decretum* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 226; Hannah Skoda, *Medieval Violence. Physical Brutality in Northern France 1270-1330*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford 2013), pp. 193-231 at 197-8 n. 19.

¹⁰ Sharon Farmer has stressed the clerical strategy for marshalling wifely support for the thirteenth century, see her 'Persuasive voices: clerical images of medieval Wives', *Speculum* 61 (1986), 517-43, though one can easily backdate such a strategy, albeit not in an explicitly formulated form, to the late eleventh century.

northern France/Flanders when the village carpenter Dagobert was lying sick in bed. When he miraculously felt better and wanted to get up his first words to his worried wife were ‘Bring me please my normal shoes.’¹¹ We may note the author’s use of dialogue to create a sense of realism for this particular domestic scene.¹² Two centuries later, according to a Bec author writing c. 1130, a Norman couple, Hugh of Pont-Saint-Pierre and his wife Teola, had to intermit their pilgrimage to Rome somewhere near Lausanne because Hugh suddenly fell ill. He was given the viaticum, seemingly died and was about to be buried when he regained life as his wife prayed to St Nicholas. Risen from the death he immediately assumed male authority by giving her orders: ‘Come here, unfasten me – [that is to say, she had to undo his body’s swaddling put in place in preparation for burial-], give me my clothes, pack our chests and prepare for our return journey home.’ Under the circumstances it is no surprise that Teola did as she was told. After their safe return home the fuller fell ill again and died; as a result he could be buried in his hometown.¹³ Husbands, as well as God himself, appreciated and rewarded wifely obedience in stories like *miracula* and *exempla* and in real life as chronicles and documents reveal. Love and affection were some of the rewards given in return for obedience. Take Stephen of Blois’ letters to his wife Adela who acted as regent for him when he was on crusade in 1096-9. In one of his letters home to her, after affectionate endearments, he wrote: ‘I order you that you do good and look after your lands expertly and that you treat your children and your men/people *honeste*, as you should,...’¹⁴ This letter shows that for Stephen at least love and affection coexisted alongside his ultimate

¹¹ BHL 8512 MS Arras BM 734 (s. xi): *Affer mihi, obsecro, solita calceamenta* I owe the reference and the translation to Dr Charles West.

¹² For this one and other examples of dialogue below as a rethorical strategy to enliven the narratives, see Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?*, 566-7.

¹³ *Miracula sancti Nicolai conscripta a monacho Beccensi*, ed. A. Poncelet in: *Catalogus codicum Hagiographicorum latinorum bibliotheca Nationali Parisiensi*, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiana, ii (Brussels, 1890), 405-33 at 419: *Nunc accede, et dissolve me, et offer mihi vestimenta mea, et sarcinas nostras praepara ut carpamus iter.*

¹⁴ *Kreuzzugsbriefe*, ed. Hagenmeyer, no. 10, p. 152: *..mando, ut bene aga et terrae tuae egregie disponas et natos tuos et homines tuos honeste, ut decet te, tractes....* Amy Livingstone, *Out of love for my kin. Aristocratic Family Life in the Lands of the Loire 1000-1200* (Ithaca-London, 2010), 172 points to the use of the second person plural ‘your’ lands, children and men/people.

responsibility for her, their children and lands, and that he had to be seen to exercise authority over her and demand her obedience. In the fictional romance *Erec and Énide*, the eponymous couple were en route when Erec wished to move on. Again, note the language used by Chrétien de Troyes, the author, when he wrote that Erec ordered (*comande*) his wife Énide to make ready for their departure.¹⁵ In these examples the language used in Latin and the vernacular is telling: the husbands give orders and the wives obey. Yet, there were circumstances in married life when husbands and wives as Christians were deemed equal and could act with the same authority in making decisions to go on pilgrimage or to give a child up for oblation, that is entry in a monastery or nunnery.

Miracle stories reveal remarkable gender equality between husband and wife when one of them expressed a wish to go on pilgrimage despite objections from the other.¹⁶ Travel by the husband was common enough for business of his lord, his own trade or for religious reasons going on pilgrimage, while far fewer women journeyed due to the perceived dangers of travel.¹⁷ Whether travelling alone, or with his wife, a man was expected to engage in some measure of negotiation in order to receive his wife's agreement. If either went alone the other had to give permission. We need only to think about the Apostle Paul's conjugal debt admonishment (1 Corinthians 7: 3 *uxori vir debitum reddat: similiter autem uxor viro*) well known to laity and clergy alike.¹⁸ Men and women were expected to provide each other with

¹⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, ed. and trans. Carleton W. Carroll, Garland Library of Medieval Literature, series a vol. 25 (New York, 1987), lines 2255-6, p. 101: *Erec ne volt plus sejourner; sa fame comande atorer*.

¹⁶ On pilgrimage, see Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims* (London, 1977), 39-58; *Encyclopaedia of Mediaeval Pilgrimage*, ed. L. J. Taylor and others (Leiden, 2010); Marcus Bull, 'Pilgrimage' *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity*, ed. John Arnold (Oxford, 2014), 200-216.

¹⁷ On the limitations for female travel, see Diane Webb, 'Freedom of Movement? Women Travellers in the Middle Ages', *Pawns or Players. Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women*, ed. C. Meek and C. Lawless (Dublin, 2003), 75-89; for female pilgrims, see S. Hopper, *Mothers, Mystics and Merrymakers: Medieval Women Pilgrims* (Stroud, 2006) and L. A. Graig, *Wandering Women and Holy Matrons: Women as Pilgrims in the later Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2009) and as portrayed in *miracula*, A. E. Bailey, 'Flights of Distance, Time and Foray: Women Pilgrims and their Journeys in English Medieval Miracles', *Gender and History* 24 (2012) 292-39.

¹⁸ Christopher Brooke, *The Idea of Marriage* (Oxford, 1989), 48-9.

sex (for procreation and to prevent adultery) an obligation that was at least in theory mutually enforceable. Yet, in most *miracula* stories going on pilgrimage is portrayed as a source of friction between a couple, usually because the husband withheld his permission from his wife if she wanted to go, and less frequently because the wife argued that her husband's absence would harm the family. Clerical authors usually sided with the 'recalcitrant' wife, but not always. Let me begin with the Fécamp monk who supported a husband's demand for wifely obedience. In the third quarter of the eleventh century Mary, wife of Osmond of Melun (Ile-de-France), refused to accompany her husband on a pilgrimage to Fécamp on the Norman coast. She accused him of selfishness and lack of care for their children. Ignoring his wife's protests Osmund left the home, while Mary suffered divine punishment in the shape of facial paroxysm. Her suffering was the result, so the story implies, by Mary's disobedience to the saint rather than her husband. In due course she repented, arranged childcare and travelled with a female companion to Fécamp where she joined her husband. There she did penance by handing over her ring to the monks, which had the immediate result of her face resuming its original shape.¹⁹ In the eyes of the Fécamp hagiographer there was no doubt that Mary was at fault. Osmond as her husband, who had every right to ask her to accompany him. In view of the importance of pilgrimage, Osmond's asking for the saint's intercession overrode her own wish for him to stay at home.

As I indicated already, the common scenario in these stories was for the hagiographers to stress women's wisdom in putting their belief in saints (and God) above earthly obedience to their spouses. In eleventh-century southern France a husband forbade his wife to go on pilgrimage to the shrine of St Faith (Sainte Foy) at Conques because she was close to childbirth. She defied him, travelled to Sainte Foy where she, too, handed over her ring. God was pleased by her arrival at the shrine where her gift restored her health. Her

¹⁹ L'Abbe Sauvage, 'Des miracles advenus en l'église de Fécamp,' *Mélanges de la société de l'histoire de Normandie*, 2e s. (Rouen 1893), 9-49 at 24-5.

choice was vindicated and she returned to her husband.²⁰ A seriously ill man in Brittany rejected his wife's offer to accompany him on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Virgin at Coutances and took a servant instead. Their ox refused to leave the courtyard as a sign from God that he disapproved of the man's hardheadedness. As soon as the husband agreed to his wife's company, the ox pulled the wagon and all three of them were able to set off.²¹ Several decades later, in 1145 Ranulf, a well-to-do burgher of Caen, accused his wife, Rohais of disobedience. He strongly disapproved of her plan to take a dumb and deaf boy to Chartres seeking intercession at the shrine of the Virgin for his recovery. Ignoring her husband's order to stay at home Rohais went to Chartres, where the little boy regained his speech and hearing. Upon her return Ranulf conceded that having gone on pilgrimage had been the right decision.²² In the last three cases the 'disobedient' wives had God on their side. Their faith in him gave them the strength to override their husband's wishes. The saints (of both genders) recognised the women's steadfastness, intervened with God, who then cured the male and female sick: the pregnant wife, the sick husband, and the deaf and dumb boy respectively.

Oblation of a child was a topic that was similarly 'gender blind' about the married donor in miracle stories.²³ A good example comes from the *Life of Theoderic I*, abbot of St Hubert in the Ardennes (1056-?90), written in the late eleventh century.²⁴ Theoderic's father Gonzo was furious with his wife's wish to have their son educated for the religious life. Two accidents - a scalded arm that subsequently fractured - had to happen to the little boy (from

²⁰ *The Book of Sainte Foy*, trans. Patricia Sheingorn (Philadelphia, 1995), I, c. 20, p. 86.

²¹ *Miracula ecclesiae Constantiensis*, ed. E.A. Pigeon, *Histoire de la cathédrale de Coutances* (Coutances, 1876), 373-4; Quirk, 'Men, Women and miracles', 58.

²² L. Delisle, 'Lettre de l'abbé Haimon sur la construction de l'église de Saint-Pierre sur Dive en 1145,' *Bibliothèque de l'école de Chartres*, 21 (1860), 113-39 at 131-4; trans. *Medieval Writings on secular Women*, ed. and trans. P. Skinner and E. van Houts (London, 2011), no. 94, pp. 195-99.

²³ The classic study for child oblation is Mayke de Jong, *In Samuel's Image. Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden, 1996).

²⁴ *Life of Theodoric of St Hubert: Vita sancti Theoderici abbatis Andaginensis*, ed. W. Wattenbach, *MGH SS*, 12, pp. 36-57 at 39-41 and I. van 't Spijker, 'Een jeugd in de Ardennen. De kindertijd van Theodericus van Saint-Hubert', *Madoc. Tijdschrift over de Middeleeuwen*, 11 (1997), 206-11 at 208-9.

which he miraculously recovered) before Gonzo agreed with his wife. They entrusted Theoderic first to their daughter Ansold, a nun at Malbod nunnery, to teach him his letters and psalms, and thereafter as an oblate to Abbot Richard of St Vannes (d. 1046) at Lobbes. The mother's reaction to first accident (the burn) was typical in that she wailed and sighed, beat her breast with her fists, scratched her face and tore at her hair, blaming herself for ignoring the dream she had had about his future as a priest, and about the sins she and her husband had committed since. The father's resistance, nevertheless, was only resolved when he found his little boy with the same arm broken after he had fallen from an upper floor of their house. It was then that he realised that the accidents were signs of divine punishment for his disagreement with his wise wife (*sapiens mulier*). Thus, in miracle stories the saints (or rather the male and female authors of their miracle stories) do not make gender distinctions when it comes to those who served them: they appear as moral supporters for husbands and wives who wish to serve them and punish them if they interfere with their spouse's devotion.²⁵

ii. Body language

Body language was (and is) an extremely important tool for men and women in the expression of their thought and emotions through gestures. Medieval (like modern) descriptions of gesture can illustrate and subvert a protagonist's thoughts and emotions. Thus the authors of *miracula* employed rhetorical descriptions of body language as an added tool to highlight, say, male authority or female submissiveness. Gestures of remorse for women's alleged failure to submit to their spouse's authority are much more common than

²⁵ For other examples in miracle stories, see de Jong, *In Samuel's Image*, 167-8 and Quirk, 'Men, woman and miracles', 58.

husbands'.²⁶ Male and female authors describe the married partners who disagree with each other in ways that are gendered with the husbands usually self-controlled and self-contained and wives much more expressive in their emotions. Take for example the body language of St Theoderic's mother, which was simultaneously a sign of penitence (beating oneself up as punishment) and mourning (deep grief at the loss of someone). She resorted to the typical gestures of penance and mourning when faced with her son's burn, by scratching her face and tearing her hair. Like this mother, the ninth-century carpenter's wife from northern France, who faced with the deterioration in her husband's conditions raised help by drawing attention to herself with the same behaviour: beating her breast and tearing her hair while wailing. This combination of penitential and grieving behaviour is so commonly ascribed to women in medieval narratives because these were culturally constructed and widely expected gestures women had to make when faced with misfortune, whether this was of their own making or not. The behaviour was emphatically not simply a literary topos without any historical basis in factual behaviour. It may have been formulaic, in the sense that the same phrases are being used, but that does not negate the reality that is being described.²⁷ There are plenty of examples from which I will select a few Norman ones: c. 1050 the miracle of St Vulfran mention the (unnamed) mother of a small boy who had accidentally swallowed his nurse's

²⁶ For the importance of gestures and body language in Middle English texts, see John A. Burrows, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval literature*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 48 (Cambridge, 2002) and Barry Windeatt, 'La3amon's Gestures: Body Language in the Brut', *Dutch Quarterly Review: Studies in Literature* 52 (2013), 253-66. See also Jean Claude Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990).

²⁷ Carol Lansing has made a study of the town regulations in thirteenth-century Italy (especially Orvieto) which began to put restrictions on, so she argued, excessive physical expressions of (male) grief at funerals, see her *Power and Order: Restraint of Grief in the Medieval Italian Communes* (Ithaca, 2008), 185-7. This study has come in for criticism that argued that the town authorities' reason for legislation on tempering behaviour was not so much aimed at the emotion of grief but at violent expressions of anger for the causes of the death of those mourned, see George W. McClure's review in the *American Historical Review* 114 (2009), 472-3. Regardless of whether the behaviour was inspired by grief or anger or a combination, the town legislation is proof that the emotional manifestations were real and not imagined!

cloak pin,²⁸ and in the 1090s a woman called Reimburga from St Pierre was reported wailing and wringing her hands by the author of the Miracles of St Nicholas, because she was in despair ‘as the female sex is wont to do’ at the loss of sacks of money she had stored in the church attic at the orders of her husband.²⁹ Near Rouen Norbert’s wife, who kept a guest house, suspected a pilgrim lodger of having stolen their valuable possessions stored in a chest in the hall. According to the Miracles of St Ouen, she wrung her hands, wailed, sent her voice to heaven while accusing her husband of mistaking a thief for a pilgrim.³⁰ Invariably, in these cases the husbands responded with kindness, reason and action, even though their deeds were not necessarily the clergy’s preferred ones – it is their wives, having recovered from the shock, who counselled to seek divine intervention through saints, in this they they were all male saints. Thus far the wives’ penitential and mourning gestures were caused by anxiety and care for the lives of others who were physically ill or faced with the loss of precious possessions. However, the gestures are significant for another reason namely as a female strategy of persuasion.

Often the penitential or mourning behaviour had nothing to do with wifely disobedience, but with a wife’s belief that her opinion should be taken seriously, something that would only work if she expressed herself using a subservient bodily posture. Take Orderic Vitalis’ description of Alberada, daughter of Bishop Hugh of Bayeux (1011/15-49), who tried to persuade her husband Albert of Cravent to make good the ill-behaviour of their son Ralph towards a monk whose horses he had stolen: ‘She lamented, wrung her hands and

²⁸ *Miracula sancti Vulfranni*, Ed. AASS March iii, pp. 154-5; trans. *Medieval Writings on Secular Women*, ed. and trans. P. Skinner and E. van Houts (London, 2011), no. 18, pp. 36-7.

²⁹ *Miracula sancti Nicholai conscripta a monacho Beccensi*, ed. A. Poncelet in: *Catalogus codicum Hagiographicorum latinorum bibliotheca Nationali Parisiensi*, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiana, ii (Brussels, 1890), 405-33, 420 (*ut se habet sexus femineus*); *Medieval Writings on Secular Women*, trans. Skinner and van Houts, no. 67, pp. 147-50 (at p. 149).

³⁰ *Miracula sancti Audoeni*, AASS August, iv, c. i, cols. 826-9 at 828.

tore at her hair, shedding tears'.³¹ These gestures were associated with subservience and knowing your place. Rather than rationally and vocally setting out objections, it seems that the women knew that they would achieve more success by pleading. They set in motion a combined strategy of body language and oral exposition that expressed both subservience through gestures of penitence and careful persuasion with words. At least in the clerical rhetoric of these stories the effect was that ultimately husbands (or sons) would not only listen to their wives (mothers) but then take action inspired by the women's advice. The narrative scenes give the strong impression that the decision making process amongst couples was one in which both partners used gendered strategies of discussion.³² These gestures and body language are not a figment of the imagination of medieval hagiographers and historians as is proven by images in medieval illustrations and discourse of medieval theologians. Female obedience did not mean that women had no role as advisers and supporters of their husbands.

The question for the historian is whether the articulation of clerical views on women's role as their husbands' advisers signals new thinking amongst the clergy in the early thirteenth century, as Sharon Farmer has argued, or whether the expressions of such clerical views articulate behaviour of married women that had always been a common female strategy that was now given clerical approval. I suspect that the latter is the case when the clergy of the central Middle Ages realised that it might be more productive to mould existing behaviour towards their own purpose rather than impose from above a demand for new attitudes. As Sharon Farmer has shown, theologians with a strong pastoral and practical outlook, like Peter the Chanter (d. 1197) and Thomas Chobham (c. 1160-1233x6), began to comment on the women's strategy explicitly, but not, I suggest, because they were the first to

³¹ *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. M. Chibnall (Oxford, 1968-80), 6 vols, iii, pp. 242-5 (*Hoc uidens Alberada uxor eius cepit plorare, manus torquere, capillos trahere*).

³² Farmer, 'Persuasive voices', 526-34.

notice this centuries' old behaviour. They actively praised married women for the use of persuasion in order to guide their husbands and reduce immoral behaviour. Where the secular clergy disagreed amongst themselves was whether such wifely advice should be given by the spoken word, that is in reciprocal discussion or whether the wife should refrain from speaking out and plead with her husband non-verbally through gestures only. The so-called author of 1 Peter, an early thirteenth-century theological-moralistic treatise, to which Sharon Farmer has drawn attention, advocated specifically that women should avoid using the spoken word:³³

‘Likewise let wives be subjected to their husbands, so that some, though they do not believe in the word, may be won without a word (*sine verbo*) by the behaviour (*conversatione*) of their wives, when they see your reverent chaste behaviour.’

Reading this advice, admittedly from only one clerical author, against the grain strongly suggests that some clergy, expressed the wish of some husbands who preferred to see a demure silent wife whose body language (bowed head and downcast eyes) would underscore her spousal submission.

When we reflect a little further, the verbalisation of what constituted subservient behaviour should not come as any surprise given the deeply held misogynistic view that one of the main problems with women was that they talked back, often challenging their companions (including husbands)!³⁴ We must assume that a wife's gestures of tearing hair, shedding tears and beating her breast was body language expected by women to have greater effect to solve an immediate marital problem rather than a discussion with the husband. Much must have depended on how the couple liked or respected each other. Nevertheless, from the

³³ As quoted in translation by Farmer, 'Persuasive voices', p. 532.

³⁴ *Woman Defamed and Woman defended. An Anthology of Medieval texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford 1992) gives plenty of examples from the early to the later Middle ages.

husband's perspective, at least in moralistic literature, there would never be a problem if his reasonable requests and orders to the wife would be obeyed without questioning the reasons that lay behind them. What is clear from the clerical perspective is that a husband's reluctance to enter a conversation with his wife was due to a perceived threat he felt when she insisted to talk things over. Faced with marital discord a husband would find that he had societal convention on his side by cutting off any discussion on the ground that his word was final – as head of the household he had custom and morality on his side. For husbands who preferred to hide behind the authority that society bestowed on them in more serious cases of perceived insubordination by their wives, acts of chastisement and the use of physical force were seen as the only way to settle a conflict. More often than not this involved physical violence perpetrated by husbands rather than by wives.³⁵ Thus far we have looked at notions of authority and obedience in married life and wifely body language as a strategy of persuasion. We should not forget, however, that in reality (or its representation in *miracula*) required daily collaboration between the couple.

iii. Collaboration

As we have seen already, the reeve and his wife from St Pierre-sur-Pont and the innkeepers couple from Rouen both faced the threat of theft (of the villagers' money or their own) together, because both couples bore shared responsibilities (for the possessions of their neighbours and guests) in marriage and business. Lower down the social scale, amongst peasants, women had to step in if their husbands were incapacitated even if the work was supposed to be a men's job or too heavy for a woman. According to Odo of Cluny in his Life of Gerald of Aurillac, when Gerald (d. c. 909), passed a field where he saw a woman guiding

³⁵ Skoda, *Medieval violence, passim*.

the plough he made enquiries why she and not her husband did the heavy work. When she explained that he was ill, Gerald immediately gave her money so that she could pay some (male) labourers to help her out.³⁶ Although this story does not feature in a miracle context but in a saint's life, I am struck by Abbot Odo's assumption against collaboration of a farmer's couple, presumably on the ground that physical hard labour is no task for women. Married women were not alone in stepping in to do hard labour. Girls too helped fathers in the field with ploughing, as in the case of the twelfth-century saintly Alpais of Cudot, whose mother was busy looking after her younger siblings.³⁷ According to Rosalind Faith, in her study of the Provençal polyptique of St Victor (813-14), on the Provençal monastic estate, most of the 101 farms were run by one married couple assisted by adults, some of who were married but many were not.³⁸ Marriage took place late with couples roughly the same age. Marriage at St Victor's estates however was certainly not universal. Those who married were mostly the couples' daughters who brought in men from outside (*extranei*). Usually only one son was allowed to marry in an attempt to reduce the number of mouths to fill, the others worked as farm hands or some were schooled for the priesthood. Illegitimate children, though rare, were the offspring of the unmarried sons but lived with their unmarried mothers. The labour provision on these farms underlines the importance of having enough hands to do the work. Of the more than one hundred St Victor farms, one third was run just by one married couple, which makes the scenario of the sick husband Gerald of Aurillac encountered two hundred years later easy to accept. Then, as now, spousal responsibilities for each other and their families were a burden for couples that on occasion was very heavy to bear.

³⁶ Odo of Cluny, Life of Gerald of Aurillac, in *St Odo of Cluny*, trans. Dom Gerard Sitwell (London 1958), 89-180 at c. 21, p. 114.

³⁷ *Leben und Visionen der Alpais von Cudot*, ed. E. Stein, (Tübingen, 1995), c. 1-2, pp. 120-23, trans. *Selected Writings on Secular Women*, trans. Skinner and van Houts, no. 27, pp. 34-5.

³⁸ Faith, 'Farms and families,' 175-201 at 195-6, 198.

At the other end of the social scale amongst the landed elite we find husbands and wives collaborating in running estates and households. In the early eleventh century southern France Hugh, lord of Casagne, 8 miles or so from Conques, had confiscated wine destined for the monastery of Ste Foy. His wife, Seengund, challenged his action as a crime, behaviour that was admired by the hagiographer (a monk of the monastery cheated out of its wine) who expressed his admiration in a series of hexameters.³⁹ Infuriated by his wife's reprimand Hugh lashed out at her:

‘Far from complying, the savage unleashed his blind greed,/And in a fit of wild rage struck her with his fists./Blood poured from her mouth and stained her clothing...’

The hagiographer's focus remained on the lord, his excessive drinking and his subsequent illness. He was bedridden for three months during which time his dutiful wife cared for him. In fact, this miracle story is one of the very few eleventh-century *miracula* highlighting a husband's marital violence, and in this case, excessively so, against his wife. Moderate physical punishment, usually by husbands or fathers of wives and children was entirely common and sanctioned by secular society and the Church. Excessive use of force was not condoned though we have to wait until thirteenth-century canon lawyers for a definition of this offence within marriage and its remedies. As Hannah Skoda has shown, in reaction to the canon lawyers who were perceived as misogynistic the vernacular *fabliaux* engaged with the topic of marital violence through subversion.⁴⁰ In these texts not the husbands, but the wives perpetrated violence to their spouses. There is, however, no trace of this in the miracle stories under discussion. There the theme of collaboration in marriage as a force of good is a frequent one.

³⁹ *The Book of Sainte Foy*, trans. Patricia Sheingorn, I, c. 6, pp. 61-3.

⁴⁰ Skoda, *Medieval Violence*, 203-4, 209-10, 214; on *fabliaux* and gender subversion, see also Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge 1995), 234-85.

A joint responsibility of wealthy Christian couples was the distribution of charity, as Andreas, monk-hagiographer of St Benoit-sur-Loire at Fleury around c. 1041, reminds us when he introduced a miracle experienced by his own parents.⁴¹ When during a famine his father had distributed most of his grain, his mother became worried about their supplies. Believing in God's mercy the husband commanded (once again note the imperative) his wife to open another storage. This she did after having attended early morning church where she prayed to St Benedict (the patron saint of Andreas' monastery) and, through whose intervention, she found that the store was full of grain. In both cases at Conques and Fleury exemplary wifely behaviour centred on the concern for local saints and local communities. As I have already tentatively noted earlier, virtuous behaviour of a married couple, or at least of married women, was easier to envisage and act upon if the married couple had some experience of love and affection for each other.

iv. Love and affection

Medieval authors of *miracula* regularly rounded off their narratives with a concluding remark on the couples' affection for each other. What has struck me in reading these central medieval narratives is that from the beginning of the twelfth century the emphasis on affectionate behaviour becomes a major theme that is worked out in more detail, at greater length and with more depth than the narratives up to that period. In the eleventh-century *miracula* there is an implicit assumption of affection between the married partners in which both owe a duty of care to each other. Much of this is unstated and not commented upon. As we have seen husband and wife live and work together and although many stories centre on a (mild) dispute of one sort or the other the portrayal of the couple is one of mutual respect and

⁴¹ *Les miracles de Saint Benoit*, ed. E. de Certain (Paris, 1858), 266-7 and Diane Webb's commentary in *Saints and Cities in Medieval Italy*, trans. Diana Webb (Manchester, 2007), 10-11.

contentment. This reflect St. Augustine's notion of the ideal Christian marriage where gradually sexual activity is replaced with non-sexual companionship and affection.⁴² Love, for him, was the uncontrollable sexual lust that threatened the stability of an enduring partnership. The popularity of St. Augustine's model of marriage in the Church was threatened in the central middle ages when a more explicit acknowledgement of the good of physical and sexual love (in marriage) began to be expressed as a valid human emotion present in nature, created by God, and thus sanctioned by him.⁴³ Authors and poets in Latin and the vernacular began to give expression to ideas about nature and emotions, including the merits of love and affection. Crucially this discussion coincided with and informed the discussion of marriage in the Church. Thus whereas in the eleventh century the miracle stories stress restrained and controlled sex in the form of marital affection, in the twelfth century we begin to see love not only as a sexual force but as a strong emotion of empathy, in descriptions of sharing someone's happiness as well as pain and suffering.

The story of Isabel, wife of William, living in the neighbourhood of Jumièges on the Seine around the 1180s, is particularly poignant in this respect. Isabel suffered from severe toothache and was advised by Prior Durand of St George de Bosscherville to visit the shrine of the saints Paul, Cyrus and Cyprianus at nearby Duclair.⁴⁴ Husband William and his father-in-law carried her all the way sitting on their interlinked arms, while they refused food and drink in the hope that this penitence would support the quest for Isabel's recovery. In Duclair they prayed to the local saints and then visited the local smith who removed her tooth. With

⁴² St Augustine, *De bono coniugali; De sancta uirginitate*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh, Oxford early Christian Texts (Oxford, 2001), pp. 2-63; For St Augustine's disagreement with Jerome's anti-marital stance, see D. G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity. The Jovianist controversy*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford, 2007), 277-84. John Baldwin, *The Language of Sex. Five Voices from Northern France around 1200* (Chicago-London, 1994), 1-10.

⁴³ Brooke, *The Idea of Marriage*, 177-83; Baldwin, *The Language of Sex*, 116-72. See also Ian Wei, *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Paris. Theologians and the University, c. 1100-1330* (Cambridge, 2012) 247-92.

⁴⁴ *Miracula ss Pauli, Clari et Cyriaci auctore Alexandro Gemmeticensi*, ed. Anonymus in: *Analecta Bollandiana*, 12 (1893), 388-408 at 401-2 and Quirk, 'Men, women and miracles', 58.

her father keeping her head still in his lap the smith managed to pull out Isabel's decayed tooth while William stood by too overcome by his wife's distress to have done what his father-in-law did. Paternal and spousal devotion are at the heart of the narrative though the fact that William is so overcome by horror at the sight of his wife's pain invites the audience to share the love he feels for his wife. The emotional pull of this story is well worked out and as such anticipates the detail of a much later miracle. It belongs to William of St. Pathus's collection of miracles of Saint Louis written in the third quarter of the thirteenth century in Paris.⁴⁵ The story relates how near Paris one Jeanne of Serris, wife of Jean the carpenter, suffered a sudden illness - which may well have been a stroke - was finally cured through the intervention of St Louis after several unsuccessful trips to various other shrines. One day in February she had woken up half paralysed and spent four weeks in bed, then went to hospital where she stayed several months until June. On new crutches she made several pilgrimages without any cure. Despite her illness she managed to spin some cloths, which she sold and with the money earned, accompanied by her daughter, barefooted went to the shrine of St Louis where she was cured. And so Jeanne's story had a happy ending. In her study of poverty in medieval Paris Sharon Farmer studied these miracles because of the evidence they present for poor families. Impoverished as a result of illness many had to resort to begging—indeed Jeanne too at one stage begged. The miracles also revealed, so Farmer pointed out, the clergy's positive attitude to work done by men, think of Jeanne's husband who was a carpenter and main breadwinner, and their unease with women working – Jeanne may have supplemented the couple's income with textile work. What I am interested in is the depiction of the interaction between the couple. On two occasions the author, William of St Pathus, explicitly says that Jeanne's husband Jehan refused to give her what was due to her. The first occasion was after she had been in bed for four weeks and clearly was not getting any better:

⁴⁵ Miracle 42, pp. 131-34 trans. S. Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in medieval Paris* (Ithaca, 2002), 120-1. See also the image of Jeanne of Serris in Paris BN ms fr 5716 p. 543 (Farmer, 120).

‘and since her husband did not want to do that what was necessary for her’ she was carried to hospital. The second time occurred after her return home from hospital to her husband and children: ‘and after that it happened that the husband did not want to find that which was necessary for her’. We are not told what the husband refused to do or find that what was necessary for his wife. Farmer assumes that he had to get to work each day and because of their poverty could not bring in help and thus she had to be taken to hospital or the second time round had to go out begging. I would like to draw attention to something else. Jehan the Carpenter is recorded as actually having carried his wife to the hospital and then carried her back home; he sacrificed time from work and thus income to transport her. And this act, for me, suggests a husband’s responsibility and care, if not affection.

A similar testimony to a husband’s empathy for his suffering wife pain is provided by one of the rare *miracula* stories written by a woman. For her story we retrace our steps to the early twelfth century. In 1107 Abbess Marsilia of Saint-Amand in Rouen sent her male colleague, the abbot of St Amand in Flanders, a letter containing a miracle story effected by St Amand, setting out the case of a very distressed wife in Lisieux (Normandy).⁴⁶ The unnamed woman had become depressed because she believed her neighbours’ gossip that her husband had been unfaithful to her. Insane with grief and unable to accept his protestations that the stories were lies, she almost succeeded in hanging herself in the church of St Amand at the nunnery where she had been committed for her own safety. Not until she was rescued and recovered from her near death experience did she reject her neighbour’s malice and

⁴⁶ *Historia mulieris suspensae...*, AASS 1 Febr, 902-3; H. Platelle, ‘Les relations entre l’abbaye Saint-Amand de Rouen et l’abbaye Saint-Amand D’Elnone’, *La Normandie bénédictine au temps de Guillaume le Conquérant (XIe siècle)* (Lille, 1967), 83-106 at 104-6; *The Normans in Europe*, ed. van Elisabeth van Houts (Manchester, 2000), no. 23, pp. 80-1; *Medieval Writings on Secular Women*, trans. P. Skinner and E. van Houts (Penguin Classic, 2011) no. 78, pp. 167-71. For another story of a husband’s affection for his mentally ill wife, see *Miracles of Coutances*, ed. Pigeon, 1876, 404.

instead accept her husband's version. The authors' emphasis on the importance of marital affection and reciprocal responsibilities within marriage becomes an increasingly prominent thread in the *miracula* narratives, though as I said before the stories become more detailed and provided more emotional depth. That we find greater engagement with the couple's emotional bond, as pictured in the *miracula*, in the twelfth and thirteenth century is a result, I suggest, of the deeper levels of clerical involvement with the institution of lay marriage.

v. Marriage as an institution

Thus far I have concentrated on the vignettes of married life written about in *miracula* from central medieval France. Their authors focus predominantly on life after the wedding once they have settled, we imagine, into the humdrum life of the married couple several years into their union. We should note the absence of *miracula*'s interest in the start of marriage, either in the form of negotiations leading up to the arrangement of marriage by parents or lords, common for the landed elite, or courting behaviour of the young couple themselves. I have found just one miracle story from Sainte Honorine at Conflans written by a monk of Bec in the 1130s.⁴⁷ The story concerns a young man who took the agonising decision to break off his courtship with a girl he loved. There were two reasons pulling him in opposite directions. Firstly, his late father had destined him for the church, though whether as monk or priest is not explained. Secondly, he had to look after his mother and younger siblings. As priest he might have been able, potentially, to combine the two obligations but only after his mother was free from care of her other children to act as his housekeeper. We are not told which of

⁴⁷ *Miracula sancti Nicholai conscripta a monacho Beccensi*, ed. A. Poncelet in: *Catalogus codicum Hagiographicorum latinorum bibliotheca Nationali Parisiensi*, ed. Hagiographi Bollandiana, ii (Brussels, 1890), 405-33 at pp. 423-4

the two obligations ultimately determined the farewell to his sweetheart. The dating of this miracle in the fourth decade of the twelfth century is important as that period saw not only a hardening of the rules of celibacy for secular priests but also increased regulation as to what exactly constituted legitimate marriages.

Yet, not the authors of *miracula*, but the authors of *exempla* took on the role of preachers warning against the pitfalls of engaging in illicit sex or not marrying properly. In contrast to the neglect of vignettes on weddings and courting in *miracula*, thirteenth-century *exempla* explore the theme of marriage making much more frequently and extensively.⁴⁸ The reasons are not difficult to identify. First, From the late twelfth century the Church formulated legislation on marriage based on consent of the young men and women contemplating marriage (rather than arrangements made by parents or husbands).⁴⁹ Following the decree *Veniens* of Pope Alexander III c. 1180 marrying legitimately became a relatively easy process because consent by the couple was the only requirement as long the couple were of the right age (12 for women and 14 for men) and not too closely related to each other by blood, marital or sexual ties. More regulations were issued in 1215 by Pope Innocent III in the form of requisition of banns, but the validity of a wedding did not depend on a priest's blessing or a church ceremony.⁵⁰ Divorce was out of the question because marriages were deemed to be forever (that is dissoluble only at the death of a spouse). The overall result of the church legislation, which had made marriage easy to contract but extremely difficult to undo, was that church courts experienced a surge in litigation about the validity of marriages. This in turn sparked greater awareness of the potential problems following the easy way in which marriages could be established. Second, there is the nature of the *exempla* whose

⁴⁸ Peter Biller, *The Measure of Multitude. Population in Medieval Thought* (Oxford, 2000), 20-1 (on Stephen of Bourbon's marriage *exempla* before c. 1260).

⁴⁹ For what follows, see Brooke, *The Idea of Marriage*, 39-60; James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago and London, 1990), 179-203; Sara McDougall, 'The making of marriage in medieval France' in *Journal of Family History* 15, 2013, 1-19.

⁵⁰ David L. d'Avray, 'Marriage Ceremonies and the Church in Italy after 1215', *Marriage in Italy 1300-1500*, ed. T. dean and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge, 1998), 107-15.

moral message is not dissimilar, as I explained above, to that of the *miracula*. Having said that, due to the intensification of preaching as a tool of the clergy to reach a larger audience, in towns and countryside, the use of *exempla* spread. The stories they told were aimed at warning the laity against immoral behaviour and they presented solutions to social and moral dilemmas. The *exempla* authors' preoccupation with the making of marriage can thus be explained in the context of increased pastoral concern with the behaviour of the married couple once they had tied the knot as well as with the process leading up to marriage. As Peter Biller has shown, the collection written by the Dominican Stephen de Bourbon c. 1260 contains several stories that pick up on these very issues. Stephen's observations on the moral conduct of young people are instructive about his perception that their courtship and marital decisions were urgent contemporary pastoral issues far more so than had been the case a century earlier.

Miracula form a useful genre of narrative sources for the modern medievalist not so much because these narratives act as a mirror reflecting social life but because they have to be seen as a representation of social life in dialogue with their protagonist and audience. This audience ranged across a wide social spectrum. At one end we find the monks and secular priests belonging to saints' shrines (where *miracula* were being produced). At the other end of the spectrum we find the lay audience to whom the clergy addressed their *miracula*. The lay world formed the setting for many of the scenarios played out in the narratives offering married men and women fictional (or not so fictional) scenes with which they might identify themselves. There is no doubt that in the *miracula* (as in the thirteenth-century *exempla*) the clerical authors' sympathy lay more often with wives and mothers than with their menfolk. The clergy praised wives who sought healing remedies through saintly intervention more than from secular doctors. They also lauded wives who stood up to husbands who were sceptical of saints as efficacious allies or who were engaged in morally dubious activities. *Miracula*

provided scenarios for married women to use persuasion as a rhetorical tool to influence their husbands' thoughts and action successfully. Words were never sufficient on their own and had to be accompanied by gendered body language. For women this ranged from a bowed head and downward gaze to the more powerful and expressive gestures of penitence and mourning (crying, tearing at hair and beating breasts). The hagiographers strongly suggest that this was the only effective strategy for their opinions to being taken seriously by their husbands.

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