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Living in Suspicion: Priests and Female Servants in Late Medieval England

Janelle Werner

Abstract This article examines ordinary priests in late medieval England who, despite clear guidelines to the contrary, employed and lived with female servants. Ecclesiastical legislation frequently and firmly warned priests against living with women, including servants, because of the potential for sexual temptation, scandal, or both. Historians have long assumed that most clerical households were homosocial, but looking closely at the living arrangements of ordinary parish priests reveals a different story. Evidence from the dioceses of Hereford and Lincoln suggests that elite clerical expectations were often ill-suited to the social and economic realities of parish life, and priests' living arrangements reflect this incompatibility. Distrust of female clerical servants was heightened during periods of church reform, when these women bore the brunt of both reforming rhetoric and action.

In the second quarter of the fourteenth century, a cleric named James le Palmer took on an ambitious project: compiling an alphabetical encyclopedia of universal knowledge gathered from canon law texts, natural histories, dictionaries, collections of exempla, and theological and pastoral works. Beginning with absolution and concluding with Pope Zacharias, *Omne Bonum* contains entries about the spiritual (commandments of the Lord), the practical (heart pains), and the mundane (beavers). Palmer was particularly fond of items relating to clerical behavior, and under the heading "Clerics," he covered seventeen topics that instructed clerics "how they should behave in every case and at every time." Unsurprisingly, many entries concern the danger of contact with women. Palmer exhorted clerics to avoid the company of widows and virgins, provided guidelines for which clerics were allowed to marry, and examined the issue of living with women. Although—or, perhaps, because—legal clerical marriage had been outlawed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Palmer was so concerned about "The cohabitation of clerics and women," as the entry is titled, that he devoted nearly three folios to the topic.[1]

An ornate initial heads this section, illustrating the necessity of keeping priests away from women. On the left side of the illumination stands a group of tonsured clerics, on the right, a group of women. In the foreground, a bishop stands

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[1] Royal MS 6 E VI, f. 295r–96v, British Library (hereafter BL). For a description and analysis of the manuscript, see Lucy Freeman Sandler, *Omne Bonum: A Fourteenth-Century Encyclopedia of Universal Knowledge*, 2 vols. (London, 1996).

between them, spreading his arms wide to separate the priests from the women. The clerics look at the bishop (or perhaps past him, at the women), and one of them raises his hands toward the bishop in a gesture of supplication. The women, too, look at the bishop (or, perhaps, at the clerics), and one woman points her finger at the bishop, as if to scold or argue with him. The bishop looks unmoved. Palmer contrasts the views of various church thinkers, acknowledging that a cleric could possibly live with "his mother, sister, aunt, or niece," that is, a woman so closely related to him that they would not be suspected of committing a sin. Yet sharing a house with even a close relation might seem suspicious; after all, according to Gratian, St. Augustine refused to live with his own sister. Palmer concluded that if a priest wanted to avoid suspicion completely, he should not have any woman living with him, not even a female servant, because "the cohabitation of women is not safe."[2]

And yet, some priests—and perhaps many priests—lived with women. Historians have begun to study the women who lived with priests as their long-term sexual partners, including both the immediate social and cultural effects of clerical concubinage and the broader implications of these relationships for clerical identity and masculinity. Ruth Karras has cast clerical concubinage as one of a variety of informal sexual unions in medieval Europe, arguing that many people viewed these relationships as similar to marriage. Michelle Armstrong Partida has asserted the societal acceptance of clerical couples in Catalunya, while Marie Kelleher has emphasized the vulnerability of clerical concubines in Barcelona. In Italy, Daniel Bornstein has found that priests who kept concubines were both widespread and widely accepted in the rural diocese of Cortona, but urban attitudes towards clerical concubinage sometimes differed. Roisin Cossar has focused on the women themselves, arguing that although clerical concubinage was tolerated in Italy, priests' concubines could nonetheless face social and legal disabilities. Other historians have focused on the far-reaching implications of concubinage for clerical masculinity, with some arguing, as Jennifer Thibodeaux and Derek Neal have, that some priests emulated lay models of masculinity by drinking, fighting, and having sexual relationships with women.[3]

We now know a good amount about the women who lived with priests as their sexual companions but little about the women who lived with priests as their servants. The only sustained attention to clerical servants comes from Italy, where Oscar Di Simplicio (for early modern Siena) and Roisin Cossar (for late medieval Venice) have looked at attitudes toward these women. Di Simplicio noted that rural clerical servants tended to be young women in their twenties or thirties; many were widowed; and most had lived and worked with their employers for five years or more. Some were also priests' sexual partners, and Di Simplicio has

[2] Royal MS 6 E VI, f. 295v, BL.

[3] Ruth Mazo Karras, *Unmarriages: Women, Men, and Sexual Unions in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2012), 148–64; Michelle Armstrong Partida, "Priestly Wives: The Role and Acceptance of Clerics' Concubines in the Parishes of Late Medieval Catalunya," *Speculum* 88, no. 1 (January 2013): 166–214; M. A. Kelleher, "'Like Man and Wife': Clerics' Concubines in the Diocese of Barcelona," *Journal of Medieval History* 28, no. 4 (2002): 349–60; Daniel E. Bornstein, "Parish Priests in Cortona: The Urban and Rural Clergy," *Preti nel Medioevo: Quaderni di Storia Religiosa* 4 (1997): 165–93; Roisin Cossar, "Clerical 'Concubines' in Northern Italy," *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 111–32; Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, "Man of the Church or Man of the Village? Gender and the Parish Clergy in Medieval Normandy," *Gender and History* 18, no. 2 (August 2006): 380–99; Derek G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago, 2008), 89–114.

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argued that these relationships were tolerated so long as they were not considered scandalous. In fourteenth-century Venice, too, servants and concubines were sometimes indistinguishable. Cossar found that notarial records did not make clear distinctions between priests' servants and their sexual partners and has argued that priests deliberately created this "slippage" by describing their sexual partners as servants when they named these women as executrices and heirs to circumvent both legal restrictions and disgruntled relatives.[4] Historians of the late medieval English clergy, such as Peter Heath, occasionally mention that domestic servants were "indispensable" for beneficed priests, who usually had their own houses. Margaret Bowker has shown that parish priests needed women to perform household tasks such as cleaning and food preparation but noted that female servants might invite pernicious gossip or be confused with concubines.[5]

This article examines parish priests in late medieval England who, despite clear guidelines to the contrary, employed female servants. Although evidence about clerical servants—female *or* male—is scant, studying female clerical servants can tell us much about the conflicting pressures on the late medieval clergy, the importance and fragility of priests' reputations, and constructions of clerical masculinity and female sexuality. Attitudes towards women who lived with priests changed significantly during the central Middle Ages, as church thinkers grew wary of women who had once been considered above suspicion. Church councils, synodal legislation, and diocesan statutes from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries illustrate these shifting ecclesiastical attitudes and prescriptions against female clerical servants. In contradiction, economic, social, and gender structures encouraged priests to have female servants. Ecclesiastical act books and visitations from the dioceses of Hereford and Lincoln shed light on how the late medieval church, its priests, and their parishioners negotiated the problem of women in priests' houses. Suspicion of women who lived with priests was again heightened during humanist reforms of the priesthood in the early sixteenth century, and these women bore the brunt of both reforming rhetoric and action.

ECCLESIASTICAL LEGISLATION ON FEMALE SERVANTS

The history of legislation on clerical celibacy is long, complex, and sometimes contradictory, but there was never any ambiguity in the church's position on priests living with women: it was a bad idea. As early as 325, the First Council of Nicaea forbid any cleric to live with any woman, "with the exception, of course, of his mother or sister or aunt, or of any person who is above suspicion."[6] In various

[4] Oscar Di Simplicio, "Perpetuas: The Women Who Kept Priests, Siena 1600–1800, in *History From Crime: Selections From* Quaderni Storici, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore, 1994), 32–64; Roisin Cossar, "Defining Roles in the Clerical Household in Trecento Venice," *Viator* 45, no. 2 (2014): 237–54, quotation at 249.

[5] Peter Heath, *English Parish Clergy on the Eve of the Reformation* (Toronto, 1969), 106, 142; Margaret Bowker, *The Secular Clergy in the Diocese of Lincoln, 1495–1520* (Cambridge, 1968), 116–18. See also Peter Heath, *Medieval Clerical Accounts*, Borthwick Papers 26 (York, 1964), 12–13, 15; Tim Cooper, *The Last Generation of English Catholic Clergy: Parish Priests in the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield in the Early Sixteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 1999), 88–90, 122–23, 170–71.

[6] Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC, 1990), 7.

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forms, this decree would be repeated, cited, and evoked in ecclesiastical legislation for more than a millennium.[7]

During the central Middle Ages, as the issue of sacerdotal purity became more important and clerical celibacy was gradually imposed, the presence of women in priests' houses took on greater urgency.[8] Church prelates more frequently discouraged priests from living with women, often invoking Nicaea, as in the Council of Clermont (1095), which decreed, "No women are allowed to live in the houses of clerics unless they are permitted by the holy canons" (that is, the Nicene canon).[9] In addition to making ordination to major orders an impediment to marriage, the First Lateran Council (1123) prohibited clerics from living not only with their wives or concubines but with any woman who did not fulfil the Nicene criteria.

In the early twelfth century, English councils, too, began to address women who lived with priests. Early legislation, such as the Council of London (1108), retained the Nicene category of women above suspicion, even while linking clerical chastity to the presence of women: "Priests shall live chastely, and they shall not have women in their houses except those who are closely related to them." The Council of Westminster (1125), similarly reiterating the Nicene canon, defined women who were free from suspicion [*mulieres que omni careant suspicione*] in terms of their reputation as well as age: according to canon law, any woman under the age of forty or fifty (legislation was inconsistent) could be presumed suspect, no matter how close a relative she was.[10] Over time, however, English prelates became increasingly distrustful of women in priests' houses. The boundaries between safe and suspicious women became more permeable and servants became more easily confused with concubines. By the middle of the thirteenth century, English bishops could assert, as James le Palmer later would, that living with a woman was unsafe.

The ongoing effort to eradicate clerical marriage helped erode the long-standing category of women considered above suspicion. As clerical wives were demoted to concubines, church prelates cast doubt on any woman living with a priest. The legatine Constitutions of Otto, established at the Council of London in 1237, denounced priests who had married secretly and threatened to suspend priests who kept concubines either "in their own houses or *alienis publicis*."[11] Statutes issued in the diocese of Durham in the 1240s not only prohibited priests from openly holding concubines [*fornicarias*], but also from having any women [*feminas*] in their houses or in other "suspicious places."[12]

Within the context of the struggle to enforce clerical celibacy, this attention to wives and concubines is unsurprising, but it was not inevitable that concern about priests' sexual partners would be applied to all women. Broader ideas about female sexuality contributed to this shift, and in his 1239 statutes for the diocese of

[7] The Nicene canon was reiterated as recently as 1917 in the *Codex Juris Canonici*.

[8] For a recent overview of clerical celibacy, see Helen Parish, *Clerical Celibacy in the West: c.1100–1700* (Burlington, 2010).

[9] J. D. Mansi, ed., *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova, et Amplissima Collectio* (Paris, 1902), vol. 20, col. 817.

[10] F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney, eds., *Councils and Synods, With Other Documents Relating to the English Church*, vol. 2, *A.D. 1205–1313* (Oxford, 1964), 700, 740; Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England*, vol. 1, *The King's Procedings* (New York, 1951), 55n2.

[11] Powicke and Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, 2:252–53.

[12] Ibid., 427.

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Lincoln, Bishop Grosseteste laid out two reasons to be concerned about women in clerical households. He began with physical purity: "Because, as Isaiah said, they who carry the vessels of the Lord should be pure and shall touch no unclean thing, we command that all beneficed priests and those within holy orders flee the sin of lust and all voluntary impurities of the flesh, guarding the purity of their chastity."[13] Other English bishops, too, were attentive to the sexual threat that women could pose to clerical chastity and purity. Like Grosseteste, they drew on the rhetoric about women's polluting sexuality that had long infused the condemnation of clerical marriage and used it to discourage clerics from having contact with any women. Thirteenth-century statutes from Salisbury reminded priests that the same hands that touched "the private parts of harlots" would also touch the body of Christ and warned them to live honorably and chastely, without physical impurity [*immunditia*].[14] The Statutes of Winchester (1224) emphasized the uncleanliness of a cleric who had sexual contact with a woman by forbidding the celebration of mass by any priest who "has fallen into fornication or other mortal sin by the frailty of the flesh" until he had confessed and received penance. And prelates at the Council of London urged their fellow churchmen "to chase from the bosom of the church that rotten contagion of lustful filth by which the honor of the church is greatly defiled," drawing attention to the pollution of not just individual priests, but the entire church.[15]

Bishop Grosseteste simultaneously drew attention to the importance and the fragility of clerical reputation: "Not only evil but all *appearance* of evil should be avoided. … And no priest shall dare to keep a woman in his house, whether kinswoman or not, from whom a reasonable suspicion could arise about his wrongful behavior."[16] The gossip and damage to his reputation that would result from an unsuitable living situation was as harmful as a priest's actual sexual misconduct. Bishop William Bitton, in statutes written in 1258 for the diocese of Wells, brought nuns into the circle of untrustworthy women who might endanger clerical reputations and decreed that priests should not "keep in their houses any woman about whom evil suspicion might arise, or frequent houses of nuns or regular sisters or have frequent conversation with them without a honest and legitimate reason."[17] Many thirteenth-century statutes explicitly linked these two issues—priests living with women and visiting nunneries—by emphasizing the potential perception of misconduct. They prohibited close contact with women, even nuns, because of the possibility

[13] Isaiah 52:11. Powicke and Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, 2:269–70; see also C. R. Cheney, *English Synodalia of the Thirteenth Century* (London, 1941), 110–41.

[14] I Corinthians 6:15. Powicke and Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, 2:62. See also Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1999), 81–85, 98–106; Amy G. Remensnyder, "Pollution, Purity, and Peace: An Aspect of Social Reform between the Late Tenth Century and 1076," in *The Peace of God: Social and Religious Response in France around the Year 1000*, ed. Thomas Head and Richard Landes (Ithaca, 1992), 280–307.

[15] Powicke and Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, 2:132 (Winchester) and 252 (London).

[16] I Thessalonians 5:22, my emphasis. Powicke and Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, 2:269–70; see also Cheney, *English Synodalia*, 110–41.

[17] *Councils and Synods*, 2:604. For similar reasons, statutes often warned priests against hearing women's confession privately; instead, they were urged to speak "in an open place." See Beth Allison Barr, *The Pastoral Care of Women in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2008), 108–16.

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that a priest's reputation might be damaged.[18] Within a century after the establishment of a celibate priesthood, these linked concerns about chastity, purity, and reputation had fused into a deep suspicion of any women in a priest's house.

The evolving terminology of English ecclesiastical legislation reflected this erosion of the distinction between safe and suspicious women. Church prelates had begun to use the terms *concubina* and *uxor* interchangeably in the early 1100s, as in the Council of Westminster (1125), which prohibited "the companionship of wives, concubines, and all women."[19] Soon, a telling shift occurred in the vocabulary used to describe priests' sexual partners: the introduction of the term *focaria*. *Focaria* meant a servant who tended to the hearth [*focus*] and could be used to describe a cook or servant—or, beginning in the thirteenth century, a priest's concubine.[20] It was first used in England in the canons of the Council of York in 1195, which prohibited priests from having *focarie* in their houses and became a common substitute for *uxor* or *concubina*.[21] A set of statutes for the diocese of Durham included a chapter titled, *De focariis amovendis,* in which the bishop decreed that priests "in order to live continently and respectably, must send their concubines [*concubine*] far away from their houses." Here and elsewhere in this council, *focaria* and *concubina* were used as equivalent, further associating domestic servants with concubines and justifying the suspicion of all women.[22]

The rising crescendo of distrust of women in priests' houses chipped away at the category of women once considered above suspicion; church prelates began to fear that even a kinswoman might pose a sexual temptation. In his mid-thirteenth-century statutes for Salisbury, Bishop Robert Bingham emphasized all women's capacity for temptation and prohibited clerics from keeping any women within their houses for any reason, even for the sake of charity. What might seem like a worthy motive (providing a poor female relative with a place to live, for example) could actually be "impiety … disguised by the appearance of piety." Bingham continued, elaborating on the temptation that all women—even kinswomen—posed: "The ancient serpent always waits in ambush … and lures incautious men to wickedness." Statutes from the diocese of Exeter made it clear that if a priest had a female relative who needed help, he could "supply the necessities of life in another house, far away."[23] Even charity was no reason to live with (or even near) a woman. As the Nicene distinction between suspicious and safe women became more porous, the presence of any woman in a priest's house could tempt him or invite scandal and jeopardize his reputation.

[18] For a broader view of the importance of reputation, see Thelma Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail, eds., *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 2003).

[19] F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney, eds., *Councils and Synods, With Other Documents Relating to the English Church*, vol. 1, *A.D. 871–1204* (Oxford, 1981), 740. Despite the outlawing of clerical marriage, a priest's partner might still be called his wife [*uxor*] as late as the mid-thirteenth century.

[20] R. E. Latham and D. R. Howlett, eds., *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (London, 1975–2013), s.v., "focarius."

[21] *Focaria* was used in 1175 in a proposition for consideration by the Council of Westminster, but does not appear in its canons, which declared that a priest should not openly hold a *fornicaria*. Powicke and Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, 1:979, 984, 1051.

[22] David Wilkins, ed., *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, vol. 1, *446–1265* (London, 1737), 572–83, quotation at 573.

[23] Powicke and Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, 2:381 (Salisbury) and 1015 (Exeter).

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In 1213, Archbishop Stephen Langton wrote the first piece of ecclesiastical legislation that specifically addressed female clerical servants and asserted bluntly: "Because, therefore, *it is not safe to live with women* for those men wanting to observe continence, we forbid that priests or beneficed clerics shall have female servants [*famulas*] of whom evil suspicion might justly arise."[24] Langton suggested that, in theory, some women might *not* invite suspicion. In practice, however, his unequivocal warning that living with a woman was unsafe both reflected and further established the widespread distrust of women who lived with priests. Langton's was no isolated warning: his statutes for the diocese of Canterbury served as the basis for much of "the great wave of diocesan pastoral legislation" issued by English bishops in the decades following the Fourth Lateran Council.[25] Nearly every set of diocesan statutes issued in the thirteenth century warned priests about the danger of living with women. Some ordered priests to evict their concubines; others warned priests to "flee the company of women" and avoid "suspicious cohabitation"; some eroded the category of women above suspicion by casting doubt on kinswomen; yet others specifically cast female servants as a threat to chastity and an invitation to scandal.

Nor was Langton's message about the danger of women, including female servants, confined to church councils and synods. We know that bishops at least intended to enforce these prohibitions, because they were put into practice in visitation articles and echoed in pastoral literature in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In 1230, Hugh of Wells, Bishop of Lincoln, issued a list of inquiries to his archdeacons, including a question about clerical households that directly echoed synodal legislation: Did any clerics in holy orders "maintain a woman, either related to him or another, of whom evil suspicion might arise?"[26] In 1252, Bishop Roger Wesham issued a similar list of articles in Coventry and Lichfield and asked parishioners to report whether a cleric in major orders "held any woman related to him, or any other woman from whom evil suspicion might arise."[27] As in Langton's proclamation, these questions left open the possibility that a priest could live respectably with a woman, but these articles must be read in the context of the diminishing number of women who were above suspicion.

Pastoral literature, too, flourished after Lateran IV, and these works reflected these contradictory prescriptions and continued to disseminate the distrust of women in clerical households. John de Burgh's *Pupilla Oculi* illustrates the tension within ecclesiastical prescriptions on female servants. Writing his pastoral manual in the 1380s, Burgh drew heavily on William Pagula's *Oculus Sacerdotis* (c. 1320) but also on his own knowledge of the Bible, theological writings, canon law, and statutes from Canterbury. Throughout the manual, he first summarized legal texts, then provided his own practical commentary on how they should be put to use.[28] Within his section

[24] My emphasis. Powicke and Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, 2:26.

[25] L. E. Boyle, "The 'Oculus Sacerdotis' and Some Other Works of William of Pagula: The Alexander Prize Essay, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, 5 (January 1955): 81–110, quotation at 81. For the history and influence of Langton's statutes, see C. R. Cheney, "The Earliest English Diocesan Statutes," *English Historical Review* 75, no. 294 (January 1960): 1–29.

[26] Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, 1:627–28.

[27] Henry Richards Luard, ed., *Annales Monastici*, vol. 1, *Annales de Burton* (London, 1864), 297, 308.

[28] Richard Helmholz, "John de Burgh (*fl* 1370–1398)," *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 18, no. 1 (January 2016): 67–72.

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"De vita et honestate clericorum," Burgh addressed the topic of women living with clerics. He opened with standard warnings and exceptions: clerics should not live with women because cohabitation offers the temptation to commit adultery. Close relatives were an exception (and Burgh specified the permitted degrees of consanguinity), as were old women [*femine antique*], as long as they were not suspect or too distantly related. Still, he concluded, it is safer not to live with a woman at all [*tutius tamen est nulli femine cohabitare*]. In his *Instructions to Parish Priests*, written around at the end of the fourteenth century, John Mirk succinctly reiterated the danger a female servant posed to clerical reputation: "Women's service you must forsake, / of evil fame lest they make."[29] Although canon law allowed clerics to live with certain women, the interpretation of church thinkers and pastoral writers eclipsed these exceptions.

Over the course of the central Middle Ages, then, the tenor and target of English ecclesiastical legislation shifted: with no place for a legitimate wife within a priest's household, church prelates cast suspicion on *any* woman living with a priest. While churchmen demoted a priest's wife to his concubine, they simultaneously elaborated on feminine pollution and temptation, reinforcing the conviction that all women were threatening to both a priest's chastity and his reputation. The long-held criteria for a clerical servant—old, closely related—remained, but were no longer impermeable. As the category of honest women constricted, distinguishing between a servant and a concubine became less important, because any woman living with a priest could harm his reputation. And so, when James le Palmer compiled his encyclopedia for clerics a hundred years later, he could say with certainty that living with women was unsafe.

DOMESTIC SERVICE IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

The church warned priests against living with women but a beneficed parish priest living in a rectory or vicarage needed at least one servant; the social, economic, and gender structures of late medieval England encouraged him to hire a young single woman. Domestic service was widespread in medieval England: many ordinary households employed at least one servant, usually a young unmarried man or woman who entered service in his or her early teens and left in his or her mid- or late twenties. Hired annually, servants typically lived with their employers (food, clothing, and lodging were part of a servant's payment) and were economically, legally, and socially dependent on the householder.[30] This pattern of "life-cycle

[29] John Mirk, *John Mirk's Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Gilis Kristensson, Lund Studies in English 49 (Lund, 1974), 70, lines 57–58.

[30] Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Changes in England c. 1200–1520* (New York, 1989), chap. 8; P. J. P. Goldberg, "Migration, Youth and Gender in Later Medieval England," in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. Felicity Riddy and P. J. P. Goldberg (Rochester, 2004), 85–99; P. J. P Goldberg, "What Was a Servant?," in *Concepts and Patterns of Service in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Ann Curry and Elizabeth Matthew (Woodbridge, 2000), 1–20; Madonna J. Hettinger, "Defining the Servant: Legal and Extra-Legal Terms of Employment in Fifteenth-Century England," in *The Work of Work: Servitude, Slavery, and Labor in Medieval England*, ed. Allen J. Franzen and D. Moffat (Glasgow, 1994), 206–28.

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service," as Peter Laslett has dubbed it, was an integral element of premodern society that affected household formation, age at marriage, and fertility.[31]

Parish priests were not removed from this economy of service. As householders, beneficed priests who lived in a parish rectory or vicarage needed servants to do household work: to clean, cook, launder clothing and church goods, and perform agricultural work. Because rectors and vicars were expected to provide hospitality and charity, servants were especially important for their household management.[32] There were wide variations in standards of living among the English secular clergy, and not all priests were householders; unbeneficed clergy, such as stipendiary chaplains, rarely had their own houses and probably did not employ servants of their own. Most beneficed parish priests, however, had at least one servant, and wealthier clergy might employ even more: a parson in Ilmington, Worcester, for example, had five servants—three men, one boy, a woman named "Mother Hale," and "two poor wenchis in my house."[33]

Male servants were widely available, and some priests, particularly elite, urban clerics, did employ men. Patricia Cullum has argued that elite clerical households in York were all male, and many contained boys and young men who were receiving clerical training from senior clergy.[34] There was no shortage of male servants in the countryside, and non-elite priests, too, sometimes hired male servants. Hugh, servant of the rectory of Chetton (Shrops), paid the poll tax in 1381, and the household account book of a fifteenth-century Dorset chantry recorded stipends paid to one or two male servants per year.[35]

Yet despite the availability of male servants, many parish priests employed women instead of men to do their household work. We cannot know why an individual parish priest decided to defy church prescription, but we can identify the economic and social structures that pressured him. First, if a household had only one servant, it was probably a woman, and single or widowed men were especially likely to hire a female servant because of the gendered nature of domestic work.[36] Men might

[31] Peter Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1977), 12–14; Richard M. Smith, "Geographical Diversity in the Resort to Marriage in Late Medieval Europe: Work, Reputation, and Unmarried Females in the Household Formation Systems of Northern and Southern Europe," in *Woman Is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society, c.1200–1500*, ed. P. J. P. Goldberg (Wolfeboro Falls, 1992), 16–59; Smith, "Some Issues Concerning Families and Their Property in Rural England 1250–1800," in *Land, Kinship, and Life-Cycle, 1250–1800*, ed. Richard M. Smith (Cambridge, 2002), 1–86.

[32] Bowker, *Secular Clergy in the Diocese of Lincoln*, 117; Cooper, *English Catholic Clergy*, 87–88, 123; Heath, *English Parish Clergy*, 138, 141–42; Heath, *Medieval Clerical Accounts*, 12, 14; Peter Marshall, *The Catholic Priesthood and the English Reformation* (Oxford, 1994), 188–91.

[33] Quotation from Heath, *English Parish Clergy*, 142, see also 160–61; see also Cooper, *English Catholic Clergy*, 88–90; Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 200; Heath, *Medieval Clerical Accounts*, 12, 15; Larry Poos, *A Rural Society After the Black Death: Essex 1350–1525* (Cambridge, 1991), 204.

[34] P. H. Cullum, "Learning to Be a Man, Learning to Be a Priest in Late Medieval England," in *Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad*, ed. Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout, 2003), 135–53; P. H. Cullum, "Life-Cycle and Life-Course in a Clerical and Celibate Milieu: Northern England in the Later Middle Ages," in *Time and Eternity: The Medieval Discourse*, ed. Gerhard Jaritz and Gerson Moreno-Riaño (Turnhout, 2003), 271–81.

[35] Fenwick, *Poll Taxes*, part 2, 408; Wood-Legh, *A Small Household*, xxii, 16, 31, 39, 55, 62, 80–81.

[36] Goldberg, "What Was a Servant?," 11; Jane Whittle, "Housewives and Servants in Rural England, 1440–1650: Evidence of Women's Work From Probate Documents," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Series, 15 (December 2005): 51–74, at 66; Jane Whittle, "Servants in Rural England

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cook and serve meals in elite homes, but even all-male, elite clerical households needed female servants: a household account from 1461 shows that the Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield employed three women to do laundry, clean the buttery, and carry goods.[37] Women purchased and prepared food (including brewing and baking), they cleaned and did laundry, they spun and did needlework, and they tended livestock in agricultural settings, so ordinary priests who had male servants would still have tasks that were considered women's work.[38] Some solved this problem by hiring women who were paid by the task: in addition to live-in servants, the Dorset chantry paid an additional expense of 16d. per year to a laundress who did the washing for the chapel and pantry.[39]

Not only did priests need female servants to perform women's work, but women were also cheaper to employ. Servants' wages were graduated and based on gender, age, and skill, and women earned less than men in domestic service, as they did in other occupations. In Jane Whittle's survey of five English counties in the mid-fifteenth century, men received double the cash wages of women, and in a sample of servants' wages from Oxford in 1390–1392, Goldberg found that the mean yearly wage was 13s. 2d. for men and 4s. 10d. for women.[40] Cash wages were only part of a servant's payment: live-in servants received food, lodging, and sometimes clothing in addition to a cash stipend, and women were less expensive to feed than men.[41] A poor, rural rector or vicar, then, might have hired a young, female servant, regardless of what ancient or current ecclesiastical laws told him to do, because she was both more culturally appropriate and more affordable.

The gendering of domestic tasks and lower wages paid to women both encouraged parish priests to hire female servants; so, too, did rural social structure. Patricia Cullum has argued that elite clerical households looked much like lay households, but that their all-male families were composed of senior clergy who provided clerical training to boys and young men.[42] Beneficed parish clergy, too, headed their own households, especially in rural England, where most incumbents were provided with an often sizeable house, outbuildings, and glebe land.[43] As households and domesticity became more socially prominent and culturally significant, having a

c.1450–1650: Hired Work as a Means of Accumulating Wealth and Skills before Marriage," in *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain, 1400–1900*, ed. Maria Ågren and Amy Louise Erickson (Aldershot, 2005), 89–110, at 90–91.

[37] P. J. P. Goldberg, trans. and ed., *Women in England, c.1275–1525* (Manchester, 1995), 199.

[38] P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire* (Oxford, 1992), 193; Whittle, "Housewives and Servants in Rural England," 62–65; Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, "Servants and the Household Unit in an Elizabethan English Community," *Journal of Family History* 9, no. 1 (March 1984): 3–23, at 12.

[39] Wood-Legh, *A Small Household*, 55. See also Carol Rawcliffe, "A Marginal Occupation? The Medieval Laundress and her Work," *Gender and History* 21, no. 1 (April 2009): 147–69.

[40] Whittle, "Servants in Rural England," 95–96; Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, 186; Goldberg, "What Was a Servant?," 15–16. For women's wages, see Sandy Bardsley, "Women's Work Reconsidered: Gender and Wage Differentiation in Late Medieval England," *Past and Present* 165, no. 1 (November 1999): 3–29.

[41] Goldberg, "What Was a Servant?," 16; Whittle, "Servants in Rural England," 95–96. According to Whittle, a woman needed only 73 percent of the caloric intake of a man.

[42] Cullum, "Life-Cycle and Life-Course," especially 278–80, and Cullum, "Learning to Be a Man."

[43] Heath, *The English Parish Clergy*, 138–43.

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female servant might have been a way for priests to create patriarchal households that were similar to those they saw around them in the parish.[44]

FEMALE SERVANTS IN THE MEDIEVAL PARISH

Although it is impossible to estimate how often parish priests hired women as servants instead of men—as Cullum has put it, the number of priests who had female servants is "significant but unquantifiable"—we can examine how church officers and parishioners reacted to these domestic arrangements.[45] In 1477, Thomas Mylling, Bishop of Hereford, asked his cathedral dean to investigate sexual offenses committed by several clerics under his jurisdiction. The dean soon reported back, assuring him that most of the offenders had confessed their crimes and had been "punished, corrected, and reformed." One priest, however, offered a revealing plea. John Devereux did not deny that he was committing adultery with Margery Wynche, the married woman who lived with him, but when the dean ordered him to "dismiss [Wynche] and expel her from the house of their cohabitation," Devereaux hesitated. He explained that he planned to evict Wynche soon, but that "he cannot renounce her during the present season of autumn without serious harm, because at this time, at least, she is indispensable in the service of governance of his house and household."[46] He promised, however, to evict her immediately after Michaelmas, the end of the agricultural season in England and a common day to hire servants for the upcoming year. Devereaux did not claim that Margery Wynche was important to him sexually or socially, though she may well have been (Devereaux neither admitted nor denied the charge of adultery); instead, he emphasized her essential economic role in his household. Devereaux's plea not only reveals the ease with which a priest's sexual partner might be confused with a servant, or his servant with a concubine, but also demonstrates the difficulty that the presence of a woman living with a priest posed.

In the mid-fifteenth century, when we first have on-the-ground evidence about clerical households, church officers treated female servants with a mixture of suspicion and toleration, prosecuting only priests and servants who were suspected or rumored to have sexual relationships. Mistrust of female clerical servants increased dramatically in the sixteenth century, however, when priests were more frequently accused of having sex with servants. Both parishioners and court officers sometimes had difficulty distinguishing between a servant and a concubine, but as time went on, this distinction mattered less: any woman living in a priest's house could become a target of prosecution.

In Hereford's late medieval church courts, priests were occasionally accused of—and admitted to—having sexual relationships with their servants. William Shillyng, the rector of Humber (Herefordshire), was charged in 1479 with having a child with his servant Alice Huchyns. Shillyng faced the same charge in 1480, but

[44] Maryanne Kowaleski and P. J. P. Goldberg, eds., *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (New York, 2011).

[45] Cullum, "Life-Cycle and Life-Course," 278.

[46] *Registrum Thome Myllyng, Episcopi Herefordensis A.D. MCCCCLXXIV–MCCCCXCII*, ed. A. T. Bannister (London, 1920), 34–36.

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claimed that the judge had already corrected him the previous year, indicating that that the relationship had been proven either through confession or conviction.[47] In 1489, William Carpynter, the vicar of Staunton-on-Arrow (Herefordshire), confessed to a long-standing relationship with his servant, Joan Bagge, and paid a hefty fine of 20s.[48] Other priests were accused, but not convicted: in 1486, Thomas Bullyn, a rector, was charged with having sex with Elisabeth Mathew, his servant. Court officers never followed up on the charge, and perhaps the accusation was not credible. Thomas had also been charged with cutting hedges, destroying his neighbor's crops, and letting his cattle into their fields and pastures; the charge of sexual misconduct may have been a malicious attack on an unpopular cleric.[49] Other priests were charged with misconduct, but never prosecuted: Walter Willyames, rector of Abdon (Shropshire), was accused of having a child with his servant Agnes, but the court never followed up on the case.[50] Scholars have noted the vulnerability of female servants to seduction and sexual exploitation by their masters, and there is every possibility that Alice and Joan—and other servants like them—were more coerced than willing.[51] Some relationships, however, were likely consensual, and a servant might become a mistress: Walter Molde confessed in 1517 to incontinence with his servant Alice, whom he had brought with him from another diocese when he took up his post in Hereford. Their mutual relocation (she came *a sua patria*) suggests an enduring relationship in which both parties had a stake.[52]

It was not always easy to distinguish a servant from a lover, and this elision could work to a priest's advantage. In 1485, John Malron, the curate of Bedstone (Shropshire), was accused of sexual misconduct with a woman named Rose, whom he held in his house (*quam tenet in domo sua*). He was not corrected for the crime, but Rose received a penance of three floggings that the judge delayed in the hope that she would reform her behavior. In February 1487, however, Malron was accused of committing the crime again, and Rose was called to perform her penance. Because Rose refused to be flogged in the penitential procession, she was excommunicated and publicly denounced by the rector of a nearby parish in May. Until then, Rose had been figured as Malron's sexual partner, but when they were charged once again in

[47] HD4/1/99, fols. 54, 58, 63, 79; HD4/1/100, fols. 41, 75, Herefordshire Record Office (hereafter HRO).

[48] Carpynter and Bagge were initially charged in 1486, but the case dragged on until October 1489; HD4/1/102 (1486–1487), fol. 38 and passim, HRO; HD4/1/103 (1487–1489), fol. 24 and passim, HRO; HD4/1/104 (1489–1491), fol. 23, HRO. They were charged again in October 1490; Joan appeared in court and denied the crime since Easter that year, but was excommunicated because she failed to appear at her compurgation; Carpynter appeared in court later that year and claimed that their relationship had ended two years prior, but he never completed his compurgation; see HD4/1/104, fol. 239 and passim, HRO.

[49] HD4/1/102, fol. 151, HRO. For accusations of sexual assault against clerics, see Caroline Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100–1500* (Cambridge, 2013), 176–91; R. L. Storey, "Malicious Indictments of Clergy in the Fifteenth Century," in *Medieval Ecclesiastical Studies in Honour of Dorothy M. Owen*, ed. M. J. Franklin and C. Harper-Bill (Woodbridge, 1995), 221–40.

[50] HD4/1/89, fol. 32, HRO.

[51] Ann J. Kettle, "Ruined Maids: Prostitutes and Servant Girls in Later Medieval England," in *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Robert R. Edwards and Vickie Ziegler (Woodbridge, 1995), 19–31, at 128; McIntosh, "Servants and the Household Unit," 20.

[52] HD4/1/113, fol. 7, HRO.

October 1487, the court clerk identified her as his servant. This identification might have been strategic or merely belated: perhaps Malron was trying to pass off his mistress as a servant, or perhaps Rose was his servant all along. By 1488, Malron and Rose had left the diocese (or, at least, that was the rumor), and the case was dismissed.[53]

Even if a priest-servant relationship did not have a sexual dimension (either real or perceived), it could invite suspicion and put a priest's reputation at risk. A case from 1468–9 displays the confusion and disagreement that might result when a priest had a female servant. Thomas Latewayte, the rector of Sidbury (Shropshire)—who had confessed to having a child with a woman named Joan fifteen years earlier—was once again summoned to court in 1468. During a recent visitation, local jurors had accused Thomas of having a sexual relationship with a woman named Alice. The judge later charged him with "keep[ing] a suspicious woman in his house, with whom he was defamed [*erat diffamatus*] of incontinence" and ordered him to evict her.[54] Thomas denied the charge, claiming that because Alice was his servant and relative, his parishioners did not consider their cohabitation suspect. And so the judge ordered him to produce parishioners—specifically, men who had not served as jurors during the visitation—to testify on his behalf. During the next court session, he brought two of his parishioners who stated that Alice was, indeed, his servant and that "they did not consider [her] in any way suspicious, in the opinion of the parishioners there."[55] A similar disagreement occurred in the diocese of Lincoln in 1519, with some parishioners of Thornton (Lincolnshire) saying that they suspected nothing evil about their rector's living situation with his servant, Joan Thakham (though they conceded that she had a sharp tongue); other villagers described Joan as a scold and a whore who "lived incontinently" with the rector and ran a tavern out of the rectory.[56]

Sexual relationships between priests and their female servants might have been common, but they were not regularly prosecuted in the fifteenth century: in Hereford between 1445 and 1500, fewer than two dozen priests were accused of sexual misconduct with their servants, a fraction (approximately 3 percent) of all charges of incontinence brought against priests.[57] Moreover, when they were prosecuted, it was often part of a focused (but sporadic) effort. In 1430, when Bishop Thomas Spofford ordered his commissary general to follow up on clerical crimes discovered during a recent visitation, the officer focused exclusively on six priests, four of whom were accused of having sex with their servants. When the clerics appeared before him, he ordered each to banish and remove the woman "from his home, service, and suspicious association."[58] Bishop Thomas Mylling (1474–1492) was

[53] HD4/1/102, fol. 87 and passim, HRO; HD4/1/103, fols. 64, 86, 173, HRO.

[54] For the use of *fama* in ecclesiastical court proceedings, see James A. Brundage, "Playing by the Rules: Sexual Behaviour and Legal Norms in Medieval Europe," in *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto, 1996), 23–41.

[55] HD4/1/94, fols. 112, 113, HRO.

[56] A. Hamilton Thompson, ed., *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln 1517–1531*, vol. 1, *Visitations of Rural Deaneries by William Atwater, Bishop of Lincoln, and his Commissaries 1517–1520*, Lincoln Record Society 33 (Hereford, 1940 for 1936), 46–47.

[57] HD4/1/89–107, HRO.

[58] *Registrum Thome Spofford, Episcopi Herefordensis A.D. MCCCCXXII–MCCCCXLVIII*, ed. A. T. Bannister (London, 1919), 124–25.

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also attentive to misconduct between priests and their servants: of the charges against priests and their servants in the fifteenth-century consistory court, most (55 percent) were prosecuted during Mylling's episcopate.[59]

FEMALE SERVANTS AND CLERICAL REFORM

This limited toleration quickly waned in the early sixteenth century when, as a result of calls for reform of the priesthood, church prelates revived earlier legislation on clerical servants, English bishops actively prosecuted relationships between priests and servants, and court officers specifically targeted female clerical servants. During the early 1500s, English churchmen—many of whom were deeply influenced by Erasmus and other humanists—called for reforms of the priesthood, lay society, and education for both ecclesiastical and secular leaders.[60] John Colet, dean of St. Paul's, argued that the clergy could lead a reformation of the laity only by example; in his sermon given before the Canterbury Convocation in 1512, he exhorted his fellow clerics to lead the "reformation and restoring of the church's estate." He bemoaned "the miserable fortune and state of the church," which had been "disfigured" by "the fashion of secular and worldly living in clerks and priests." Recalling the purity of the apostolic church, Colet urged the English clergy to live according to "the laws and holy rules given of fathers, of the life and honesty of clerks" and to avoid a worldly, carnal life. Priests should not engage in usury, hunt, gamble, haunt taverns, or dress extravagantly; they were forbidden to have "suspicious familiarity" with women. Colet was deeply concerned with clerical reputation and maintaining the hierarchical distinction between clergy and laity: "priesthood is despised, when there is no difference betwixt such priests and lay people."[61] Priests who lived with female servants looked too similar to laymen. Other early sixteenth-century printed sermons explicitly condemned living with women. William Merton, Colet's contemporary and friend, warned clerics "to abstain from the appearance of evil" and prohibited them "not only from cohabitation with women, but also from familiarity or suspect intimacy." John Alcock pithily reminded priests that they should not "dwell with women," because "hard it is to be among scorpions and be not venomed."[62]

Colet also called for provincial councils "to be oftener used for the reformation of the church" and, in 1518, Thomas Wolsey did just that.[63] After the flurry of statutes about clerical concubinage and women living with priests in the thirteenth and early

[59] Mylling's episcopate also saw an increase in all charges of sexual misbehavior brought against priests in the diocese.

[60] G. R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation: England, 1509–1558* (Cambridge, 1977), 12–16; R. N. Swanson, "Problems of the Priesthood in Pre-Reformation England," *English Historical Review* 105, no. 417 (October 1990): 845–69, especially 861–63.

[61] Spelling modernized. Colet's sermon is reprinted in J. H. Lupton, *A Life of John Colet*, 2nd ed. (Hamden, 1961), 293–304. See also Jonathan Arnold, *Dean John Colet of St. Paul's: Humanism and Reform in Early Tudor England* (London, 2007), chap. 5; Lucy Wooding, "From Tudor Humanism to Reformation Preaching," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*, ed. Peter McCullough et al. (Oxford, 2011), 329–47.

[62] William Melton, *Sermo exhortatorius cancellarii Eboracensis hiis qui ad sacros ordines petunt promoveri* (London, 1510), Avi^{v} (Early English Books Online); John Alcock, *Sermon on Luke VIII* [*Sermo Iohannis Alcok episcopi Eliensis*] (London, 1502), Dii^{r-v} (Early English Books Online).

[63] Lupton, *A Life of John Colet*, 302.

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fourteenth centuries, church councils had said little about the topic for over a century. But the York Convocation (held, in fact, at Westminster), assembled by Wolsey for the reformation "of various abuses" in the church, reissued legislation on a wide range of issues: clerical ordination and literacy, non-residency, pluralism, pastoral care, and clerical "life and honesty." In addition to addressing priests who held concubines or lived with women, the York Constitutions revived statutes from earlier councils about both priests' concubines (who should be excommunicated and, if unreformed, handed over to secular authorities and denied burial in consecrated ground) and their servants: priests should "flee the company of women and the cohabitation of anyone about whom evil suspicion might arise."[64] Wolsey was surely flexing his legatine muscle by calling the Convocation, but at least some English bishops implemented these reforms in their dioceses.[65]

In the midst of this enthusiasm for reform, Charles Booth was appointed Bishop of Hereford in 1516, holding the office until his death in 1535. Booth was committed to reform and actively concerned with the behavior of clerics in his diocese. A hands-on bishop in terms of clerical discipline, he scrutinized clerical behavior and pastoral care more comprehensively than his predecessors, disciplining his parish priests when they celebrated mass twice in one day or in a church that had been polluted by bloodshed, failed to say vespers, neglected pastoral care, or behaved inappropriately by gambling or frequenting alehouses. In 1518, he attended Wolsey's council and, soon after, called a diocesan synod to implement the York Constitutions and reform "the dress, life, and morals" of his clergy.[66]

Of the various abuses that the York Constitutions addressed, Booth was most concerned with clerical chastity, both real and imagined—that is, sexual misconduct, but also any behavior that endangered a priest's reputation, like living with a female servant. Booth prosecuted sexually misbehaving priests far more actively than Hereford's previous bishops. Charges of sexual misbehavior against clerics rose sharply during his episcopate, from an average of forty-four charges per year in the 1480s to an average of 112 charges per year in the 1520s.[67] In the court year beginning in 1525 alone, 196 charges of sexual misbehavior were brought against 111 individual priests (in a diocese with perhaps 800 to 1,000 secular clerics).

Booth was especially attentive to long-term clerical relationships. In each court book from Booth's predecessors, charges of fornication (that is, a brief or even singular sexual encounter) outnumbered charges of concubinage (a stable relationship), sometimes by twice as many. In 1488–9, for example, Bishop Mylling charged thirty-two priests with fornication and only sixteen with concubinage.[68] Booth's officers

[64] David Wilkins, ed., *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, vol. 3, *1350–1545* (London, 1737), 669–70.

[65] Wolsey called the council as legate *a latere*, not as archbishop of York, possibly as a means of exerting jurisdictional authority over the archbishop of Canterbury. In his register, Booth refers to it as "a council of the bishops of the provinces of Canterbury and York." *Registrum Caroli Bothe, Episcopi Herefordensis A.D. MDXVI–MDXXXV*, ed. A. T. Bannister (London, 1921), 66–67.

[66] *Registrum Caroli Bothe*, 59–60.

[67] This increase may partially reflect a growing clerical population, but increased recruitment cannot account for such a dramatic increase in prosecutions. For late medieval clerical population, see R. N. Swanson, "Problems of the Priesthood," 861; Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 35–36.

[68] HD4/1/103, HRO.

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inverted the ratio: in Booth's 1529 and 1530 court books, charges that indicated an enduring relationship (particularly accusations of maintenance or cohabitation) far exceeded charges of fornication. Booth focused on established, long-term unions: in 1530, the priest Maurice ap Hugh was accused of having a relationship with Dothgy, a married woman with whom he had been living for two years.[69]

The case of David ap John, a priest in Monmouth (Monmouthshire), and his concubine Alice Phelpottis, provides a good example of Booth's zealous prosecution of clerical couples. In 1526 or early 1527, the two were accused of having a sexual relationship, and the commissary general ordered them to stop living together. They failed to appear when summoned to court a month later and were both suspended from divine services. David ap John finally appeared before the judge in May and, when questioned about the charge, replied that he "could not deny" the crime. Taking this as a confession, the judge assigned him two floggings as penance, but ap John again failed to appear on the day he was supposed to certify that he had completed his penance. The charge was continued until the next court year. In November 1529, ap John and Phelpottis were summoned to court again but still did not appear. They were excommunicated in February 1530, and the case was again continued. Finally, in May 1531, Phelpottis appeared in court and was given five floggings around the parish church as penance. The priest seems to have appeared in front of Booth himself in 1530 or 1531, but it is unclear whether it was before Booth sent a request on 31 October 1530 to the king to have David ap John arrested by secular authorities.[70]

Meanwhile, in May 1527, Bishop Booth had taken the unusual step of issuing a mandate to David ap John's fellow clergy in the deanery of Archenfield. David ap John, he declared, was "a public and notorious fornicator" who would not be corrected. He "openly held the fornicator Alice Phelpottis in his house and as a result of their abominable and wretched sexual intercourse, they had a child." The mandate continued, describing how ap John had been warned—and had refused—to evict her from their "noxious and sinful cohabitation." Finally, Booth asked his clerics to warn David ap John's parishioners that "no one should listen to the mass of a priest who has a concubine *or a woman* living with him."[71] Church prelates had long admonished laypeople to boycott priests who openly held concubines, and pastoral writers had reiterated this warning; James le Palmer stated in *Omne Bonum*, "If it is well known [*notorium*] that [a priest] keeps a concubine, then it is not permitted to hear mass by him."[72] Within this context, Booth's decree is particularly revealing about his attitudes towards women in priests' houses: whether or not she was a sexual partner, a woman's presence was unacceptable.

Given his interest in clerical reform and his focus on long-term relationships, it is not surprising that Booth prosecuted priests who had relationships with their servants far more frequently than his predecessors. In the seventy years preceding Booth's episcopate for which we have records (that is, between 1445 and 1515), a total of thirty-eight priests were accused of having sexual relationships with their

[69] HD4/1/121, fol. 150, HRO.

[70] HD4/1/119, fol. 105r, HRO; HD4/1/120, fol. 292, HRO; *Registrum Caroli Bothe*, 244.

[71] My emphasis. *Registrum Caroli Bothe*, 190–91.

[72] See, for example, the Roman Synod of 1059; J. D. Mansi, ed., *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova, et Amplissima Collectio* (Paris, 1902), vol. 19, col. 897; Royal MS 6 E VI, part 2, fol. 296v, BL.

female servants. During just nine years of Booth's episcopate (some of his court books are no longer extant), sixty-three priests were charged with incontinence with their servants. Much like Booth's prosecution of concubinage, some of these were long-term relationships. In 1525, for example, the rector of Sutton (Herefordshire) confessed to reoffending with his servant Eve, who was still living with him against the judge's orders, and in 1530, John Taylor confessed to having two children with Margaret, his servant, who had been living with him for four years.[73]

Booth's prosecution of priests who had relationships with their servants fits the pattern of his broader prosecution of concubinage. He also, however, pursued priests who simply employed female servants, targeting any woman who lived with a priest. Particularly in the 1520s—perhaps as a result of Booth's 1518 synod affirming reforms of the priesthood—many charges against priests were aimed at removing a woman, usually a servant, from a priest's house. Unlike earlier accusations, the wording of these accusations is uncharacteristically vague, with no reference to sexual misconduct. In 1530, for example, the vicar of Brinsop (Herefordshire) was accused of maintaining a certain suspicious woman in his home and "men suspected evil of them" (*homines de eis male suspicantur*).[74] The vicar was not directly accused of having a sexual relationship with the woman who lived with him, but her mere presence damaged his reputation. Local gossip likely prompted the charge, but this was not always the case. In 1528, William Phellyppis, a priest from Castle Frome (Herefordshire), was simply charged with maintaining a suspicious woman in his house [*tenere mulierem suspectam in domo sua*].[75] Again, the charge made no explicit accusation of sexual misbehavior, nor was there an indication of community suspicion. Perhaps it was meant as a preemptive means of protecting Phellyppis' reputation.

Before Booth's episcopate, these vaguely worded charges about "maintaining a suspect woman" were rare: I have only found six such charges between 1445 and 1520 (one of them was made against Thomas Latewayte and his servant, discussed earlier).[76] Between 1522 and 1531, however, nineteen charges of "suspicious cohabitation" were made against priests. These clerics were likely violating long-standing canon law against living with young, unrelated women; prosecution of the crime, however, was new. These efforts to remove women from clerical households may have been, in part, an effort to stamp out clerical incontinence, but the lack of substantive charges of sexual misconduct suggest that Booth targeted priests who kept any women in their homes—female servants, in particular—as a means of enforcing the Nicene canon and improving the moral reputation of the clergy.

Booth was an especially committed and eager reformer of his parish priests, yet his prosecution of female clerical servants was part of a wider pattern of sustained attention to women who lived with priests. A unique quasi-census from the diocese of Lincoln suggests that Booth's actions were not isolated, because both he and the bishop of Lincoln had a similar goal—removing suspicious female servants from clerical households. Between 1517 and 1519, Bishop William Atwater and his vicar-general made a visitation in which they traveled throughout the diocese, assessing

[73] HD4/1/118, fol. 268, HRO; HD4/1/121, fol. 253, HRO.
[74] HD4/1/121, f. 417, HRO.
[75] HD4/1/119, fol. 99r, HRO.
[76] HD4/1/91, fols. 55, 154, HRO; HD4/1/92, fol. 43, HRO; HD4/1/94, fols. 55, 112, HRO; HD4/1/108, fol. 112, HRO.

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pastoral care, parish churches, and the behavior of clergy and parishioners.[77] In most ways, Atwater's is an utterly typical medieval visitation, and clerics and churchwardens answered standard questions: Do any churches lack a priest? Is the cemetery enclosed? Does any rector or vicar fail to reside in his benefice? Does any man in holy orders have a wife or concubine? Although few of these articles of inquiry survive for late medieval England, we can reconstruct their questions from extant visitation returns, and questions about priest's wives or concubines had been a standard question since the thirteenth century. It is clear from Atwater's written presentments that his officers were asking additional questions about clerical households: Is there a woman living with the priest? Is she suspicious?[78]

Earlier visitations in Lincoln by Atwater's predecessor showed sporadic prosecution against priests for living with women: eight priests were charged in 1500, one in 1507–1508, and one in 1509–1510.[79] Over the course of Atwater's visitation, however, the visitor reported 166 priests for infractions involving women. As in Hereford, Lincoln's officers charged some of these men for having relationships with their servants: Henry Pepper, rector of Harrington (Lincolnshire), was suspected of incontinence with his servant. He had been keeping her [*custodivit*] for two years but sent her away [*removebat*] right before the visitation.[80] Alice, the servant of the vicar of Bringhurst (Leicestershire), gave birth in the vicarage and officers suspected it was the vicar's child; his parishioners reported that he already had two children by his other servant, to the "great scandal" of the village.[81]

Yet these charges of suspected sexual misbehavior (getting a servant pregnant, having "suspicious conversation" with a woman, or living "incontinently") account for less than 10 percent of all notations about priests and women. The bulk of these notations—152 out of 166—are simply reports that there was a woman, presumably a servant, living with a parish priest, usually a rector or vicar. Many entries were brief, merely recording a woman's presence: the rector of Biscathrope (Lincolnshire) keeps a woman in his house [*habet in domo sua mulierem*].[82] Other entries provided more information about the woman's age, marital status, or her relation to the priest: the rector of Hatton (Lincolnshire) lived with his mother and a young girl; the rector of Alkerton (Oxfordshire) lived with his brother and sister-in-law; the vicar of Utterby (Lincolnshire) lived with his niece.[83] This information, I argue, served as a means of assessing a servant's character: as the visitor described her, she was either *suspecta* or *non suspecta*.

[77] Thompson, *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln*, 1:1–140.

[78] For typical thirteenth-century visitation questions, see Luard, ed., *Annales de Burton*, 296–298, 307–310. I suspect that Bishop Atwater instructed his officers to ask a series of questions similar to the ones used in the diocese of Worcester in 1569 (but without the acknowledgement of married Protestant ministers): "Whether that your minister, being not married, keep in his house any women, of what age they be, how many they be, and how near of kin they be unto him." Walter Howard Frere, ed., *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation*, vol. 3, *1559–1575* (London, 1910), 224.

[79] Bowker, *Secular Clergy in the Diocese of Lincoln*, 115–116.

[80] Thompson, *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln*, 1:67. For the rector's subsequent court appearance, see Margaret Bowker, ed., *An Episcopal Court Book for the Diocese of Lincoln, 1514–1520*, Lincoln Record Society 61 (Lincoln, 1967), 118.

[81] Thompson, *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln*, 1:11.

[82] Ibid., 65.

[83] Ibid., 64, 126, 74.

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The criteria laid out in the Nicene canon—age, consanguinity, and reputation—figure prominently in the assessment, but other factors, including a woman's reputation and appearance, also mattered. Many servants were considered "above suspicion" because of their age (usually forty or fifty years old) or relation to the priest. Some women were described as old [*senex, vetus*, or *matura*] or middle-aged [*mediocris etatis*], like the servant of the vicar of Cadney (Lincolnshire) who was sixty years old and *non suspecta*. Other servants were above suspicion because they were closely related to their employer, like the three young relatives [*tres juvencule consanguineae*] of the vicar of Scotton (Lincolnshire), who were also noted as *non suspecte*. Reputation, however, could override kinship or age. The vicar of Aby (Lincolnshire) employed his relative, but she was nonetheless described as *suspecta*; even though the vicar of Waddingham's (Lincolnshire) two servants were young girls, they had good reputations. The two women who lived with the rector of Suttersby (Lincolnshire), however, were vaguely described as "reasonably pretty" [*satis formose*]—and their attractiveness earned the rector a *nota* in the margin of the visitation book.[84] Describing a woman as suspicious did not necessarily mean that the officer suspected a priest of sexual misbehavior with his servant. Rather, he was evaluating a priest's compliance with canon law (age, kinship, and potential for malicious rumor) and a woman's potential to attract suspicion and damage a priest's reputation.

In both Hereford and Lincoln, the goal of ecclesiastical officers was often to evict a female servant, even in the absence of sexual misconduct. John Tiler, the vicar of Dormington (Herefordshire), was first charged in 1522 with incontinence with Alice Wolfe, his relative (*consanguina*), who lived with him as his servant. Tiler denied the charge but was ordered to evict Wolfe anyway, "because he was defamed" (*pro eo quod diffamatur*)—they had, apparently, become the subject of parish gossip.[85] And defamation was not just a matter of reputation; if a priest's relationship with a woman was "notorious," public knowledge was enough to convict him.[86] A couple of years later, in the spring of 1524, Wolfe was still living in the vicarage, and Tiler was again charged with incontinence.[87] He denied the charge again, and despite successfully proving his innocence in court, he was once again ordered to remove Wolfe from his house "because he was defamed with her."[88] However, Wolfe was still living with Tiler in October 1525, when he was charged with incontinence for the third time. He continued to deny having a sexual relationship with Wolfe, but he did confess that she was still living in his house. He received penance—not for a sexual relationship, but for confessing that he lived with Wolfe against the judge's order [*fatetur quod mulier est in domo sua contra injunxiones et habet ii fustigationes*].[89] As they had with David ap John and Alice Phelpottis, Hereford's court officers pursued this case for a number of years. But unlike that case, Tiler, while charged with sexual misbehavior, was punished only for living with a woman. Whether Tiler and Wolfe had a sexual relationship we cannot know, but

[84] Ibid., 89 (Cadney), 97 (Scotton), 82 (Aby), 95 (Wadingham), and 78 (Suttersby).

[85] HD4/1/115, fols. 237, 246, HRO.

[86] For *per notorium* procedure, see Adam J. Davis, *The Holy Bureaucrat: Eudes Rigaud and Religious Reform in Thirteenth-Century Normandy* (Ithaca, 2006), 117–28.

[87] HD4/1/117, fols. 2, 14, HRO.

[88] Ibid., fol. 2.

[89] HD4/1/118, fol. 269, HRO.

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given the court's disinterest in determining the nature of their relationship (Wolfe was not even summoned to appear in 1525) it seems more likely that she was his servant than his lover. What *is* clear, however, is that court officers were intent on getting her out of his house.

This trend was not restricted to England. Roisin Cossar has found a similar trajectory in Italy, where thirteenth-century legislation began to restrict female kin from living with priests. By the fourteenth century, church officers were closely policing clerical behavior, including scrutinizing any woman who lived with a priest. In 1332, the bishop of Ferrara required a priest to have an episcopal license if he lived with a woman—even if he claimed she was a relative.[90]

We can only speculate why Booth, Atwater, and other bishops were newly intent on enforcing canon law and evicting these women—enacting clerical reforms, protecting priests' reputations, or shielding priests from temptation—but we can be sure that their agenda had different consequences for priests and the women who were their servants. In both Hereford and Lincoln, priests who were convicted (of either sexual misconduct or simply of living with female servants) were punished infrequently and leniently: John Tiler received only two floggings when he confessed that he was still living with Alice Wolfe.[91] In contrast, their servants lost their employment and were evicted from their homes. John Mathew, the curate of Monnington on Wye (Herefordshire), was accused of having a relationship with his servant, Elizabeth Taylor; he denied the charge and promised to prove his innocence by compurgation. When Mathew could not find two other priests to swear to his good character, the judge gave him another chance—but only gave Taylor two days to leave Mathew's house and find another place to live.[92]

Female servants were evicted whether or not church court officers suspected a sexual relationship. Alice Pirton, the servant of a chaplain in Little Wenlock (Shropshire), was accused of having an illegitimate child with a layman. Although she denied the crime, the defamation must have been enough to consider her *suspecta*, because the judge nonetheless told her that she had just four days to move out of the chaplain's house. When she replied that she did not want to leave, the judge excommunicated her.[93]

Alice Pirton's precarious situation was not unusual. Scholars have long argued that female servants were a particularly vulnerable group of women. They were in danger of sexual abuse and exploitation by their masters, who sometimes coerced them into prostitution.[94] Young women in domestic service were disproportionately

[90] Roisin Cossar, "Mothers (on Top) in the Venetian Clerical Household" (paper presented at the 19th Biennial New College Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Sarasota, 6–9 March 2014).

[91] HD4/1/118, fol. 269, HRO.

[92] HD4/1/116, fols. 35, 36, HRO.

[93] HD4/1/118, fol. 118, HRO.

[94] For the sexual vulnerability of female servants and the connections between domestic service and prostitution, see Michael Goodich, "*Ancilla Dei*: The Servant as Saint in the Late Middle Ages," in *Women of the Medieval World*, ed. Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F. Wemple (New York, 1985), 121–36; Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2003), 59–65; Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1988), 265–66, 286; Ruth Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York, 1996), 55–64; Kettle, "Ruined Maids"; Kowaleski, "Women and Work in a Market Town: Exeter in the Late Fourteenth Century," in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Bloomington, 1986), 145–64; Philippa Maddern, "'Oppressed by Utter Poverty': Survival Strategies for Single Mothers

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prosecuted for sexual misbehavior in church courts (and, in the seventeenth century, domestic servants made up the majority of women accused of infanticide). And like Pirton, they were frequently mothers of illegitimate children: servants constituted one-third of single mothers in medieval and early modern England.[95] The suspicion that fell on women who were clerical servants compounded their social and cultural marginality, and to these disadvantages we should add their economic vulnerability: if they worked as priests' servants, they might suddenly be evicted and forced to find a new home and employer.

CONCLUSION

The prescriptions and enforcement of canon law did not fall equally on priests and their servants. In the central Middle Ages, women in clerical households came under increased suspicion, and factors that had previously shielded a woman from suspicion were no longer enough to protect her. Although intended to combat clerical concubinage, thirteenth-century statutes and their sixteenth-century revival encouraged ecclesiastical officers to scrutinize any women who lived with a priest. Whether she was a priests' sexual partner or merely his employee was of little significance; the conflation of servant and concubine was present in both prescription and practice.

Acknowledging this slippage, Cossar had advocated using the term "companion" to describe either a priest's concubine or his domestic servant, because intimate bonds were an important element of pre-modern households.[96] The designation "companion," which emphasized the intimate bonds (sexual or not) between priests and their servants, gives us a more complete, more complex picture of an ordinary clerical household. And acknowledging the presence of women in priests' houses has implications for how we think about clerical households and clerical identity. Many scholars have identified the Protestant Reformation as a catalyst in the redefinition of clerical masculinity as patriarchal masculinity. Michelle Wolfe, for example, has argued that post-Reformation English Protestant clerics remade themselves physically and sexually through a variety of "manhood acts" that allowed them to access and assert patriarchal privilege and masculine dominance: marrying, having children, sporting beards, and shunning distinctive clerical garb.[97] But well before the Reformation, ordinary parish priests were assuming some markers of lay masculinity—employing female servants and acting as heads of a household—in ways that their elite,

and Their Children in Late Medieval England," in *Experiences of Poverty in Late Medieval and Early Modern England and France*, ed. Anne M. Scott (Aldershot, 2012), 41–63, at 59.

[95] Poos, *A Rural Society*, 192; Laura Gowing, "Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past and Present* 156, no. 1 (August 1997): 87–115, at 89; Maddern, "Oppressed by Utter Poverty," 47. Marjorie McIntosh found a similar trend in early modern England: *A Community Transformed: The Manor and Liberty of Havering, 1500–1620* (Cambridge, 1991), 70–71.

[96] Cossar, "Defining Roles," 238n6.

[97] Michelle Woolf, "The Altar, the Pulpit and the Phallus: Masculinity and the Reconstruction of Clerical Authority in Protestant England, 1540–1640," (paper presented at the 15th Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Amherst, 9–12 June 2011). See also Cullum, "Life-Cycle and Life-Course," 271.

homosocial brethren were not. The presence of women as servants in their households allowed parish priests to participate in and reinforce what Felicity Riddy has described as the "discourses of domination and power" that were present in everyday life.[98] Having a female servant did exactly what John Colet feared: it eroded the difference between priests and laypeople. Employing female servants—and thus presiding over a household—allowed some priests access to domestic patriarchal dominance well before the Reformation.

[98] Felicity Riddy, "Looking Closely: Authority and Intimacy in the Late Medieval Urban Home," in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca, 2003), 212–28, quotation at 220.

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