

**Narratives of a Nurturing Culture:
Parents and Neighbors in Medieval England**

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A current trend in thinking about the problems of neglected children and unruly youth is to look more seriously at the community we have lost rather than the family we have lost. Recent newspaper articles speak of community members being inhibited from taking any role in intervening with someone else's children for fear of lawsuits. Governments have increasingly stepped in where a more informal community of neighbors fears to tread. In studying the medieval world, one of the assumptions has been that a strong sense of community and corporate organization generated not only cooperative action but also emotional loyalties. We who study medieval society have been as remiss in ignoring this simple truth about the past as have modern social commentators.

Medieval historians and others have focused too much attention on a one-cause battle--proving that a concept of childhood existed in the Middle Ages and thereby proving that Philippe Ariès, Lawrence Stone, and the other early modern historians were wrong as usual.¹ By concentrating our attack on one front only, definitions of childhood, we have neglected the two-way relationship between parents and children, and we have overlooked entirely the importance of community in raising and protecting children. It is time to turn our attention toward the dynamics of the relationships among the three. We have followed Ariès too closely in trying to point to a clearly defined concept of childhood, to a parental attitude toward children that can only be loving if it is cast in the mold of twentieth-century sentimentality about childhood. Our interest in community responses to children and childhood has been limited to cultural expressions of love of children rather than to the discipline, training, and oversight that the community might be willing to assume in rearing children.

The culture of nurturing was continually articulated in medieval sources ranging from coroners' inquests to the Prioress's tale about the martyred little schoolboy. It is easy to ignore this simple value because it was repeated so frequently that it seems formulaic. In the Prioress's tale, for instance, when her son failed to return home,

This poure wydwe awaiteth al that nyght
After hir litel child, but he cam nocht;
For which, as soone as it was dayes lyght,
With face pale of drede and bisy thocht,
She hath at scole and elleswhere hym soght.²

When she finally found him in a pit "The Christene folk that through the strete wente" gathered around and quickly sent for the provost (VII.614). The parents and the neighbors are the ones to seek out the missing children when they fail to appear and it is they who undertake to protect the orphans and the vulnerable young people sent off as servants and apprentices. The presence of these important adults in children's lives as at their deaths escapes our attention because of their mundane frequency.

In this paper I will look at both the record and folkloric sources such as the Miracles of Henry VI,³ to show how a consistent, didactic narrative, reinforced by law, continually emphasized the theme of adult responsibility for children. Lessons for such responsibility are surprisingly absent in liturgy, penitentials, advice to parish priests, or sermons.⁴ Instead, I argue, they were better and more frequently taught by lay recitations of miracles involving children, coroners' inquests into childhood accidental deaths, and the public application of laws that protected children. Both the narratives and the practice coincided to form coherent moral values for the protection of vulnerable children. Indeed, in the case of the late fifteenth-century miracles of Henry VI, fourteenth-century coroners' inquests into the death of children, and the hagiography of child saints such as William of Norwich and Hugh of Lincoln, the narrative style is so

similar that one detects a common topos for childhood violent death and parental and community response.

The Narratives of Childrearing

The official and popular demands for public narratives about children were numerous. Passing time on pilgrimage was certainly an occasion for pious narratives about the child-saints Hugh of Lincoln and William of Norwich and probably also the miracles of Henry VI. Such narrative occasions extended to every type of trip. One of the miracles of Henry VI speaks of three late adolescents walking beside a loaded wagon occupying "themselves in their customary stories and in trifles (for thus they relieved the labor of their journey, and in a way shortened the distance of it)."⁵ More formal story telling, however, revolved around various inquests. When the pious went to a tomb or a shrine, such as the tomb of Henry VI, to report a miraculous cure or when the clerical investigator came to inquire about the veracity of the miracle the whole story would be told again. But it would have been recounted and embellished many times in the twenty or so years before the cleric came to ask them to recollect the miracle. The retelling of the story, then, was not limited to the version which was preserved in a miracle book. Likewise, when a child was found dead in a medieval village or town the coroner was called to investigate the death. Since there were four coroners in the county, it could take a day or so for one to arrive. Starting with the discovery of the body, the condition of the corpse and the scene of the accident, the inquiries and hypotheses of the child's actions, the scene and hour of the death, the whereabouts of parents or other responsible adults must all have been thoroughly discussed and a story pieced together before the coroner appeared.

The coroner arrived on horseback, as did his clerk, who would record the local people's testimony about the homicide, suicide, or misadventure (accidental death). The locals spoke in English and the clerk rendered this into Latin. The coroner's charge was clear: he must inspect the body by stripping it and turning it over to explore the extent, nature, and depth of the wounds and other evidence to establish the probable cause of death. If he suspected homicide, then he had to find out who should be indicted. If death was accidental, then he must find out what caused it, assess the *deodand*, and collect that money for the king. The *deodand* was a gift to God collected from the value of the instrument that caused the death and, in the Anglo-Saxon period, used for prayers for the soul of the dead person. The Norman kings collected the money for their own uses. Solely examining the body would not give the coroner all of this information, and so by law the adult males of the four surrounding vills in the countryside or the four neighboring wards in London were called upon to testify or offer verification of the story.⁶

All the elements of dramatic narrative were present: a sudden death provided a conclusion to a tale that needed a beginning (an explanation); a big audience of interested speakers and listeners assembled; a recognized leader asked questions to structure the narrative; and someone recorded the story.⁷ An investigation into a miracle was similar in many ways: a death and, in this case, a miraculous restoration to life; an audience of interested listeners and interlocutors; a clerk to structure the questions; and a record of the narrative.

In both the coroners' inquests and the miracles attributed to Henry VI, children were often the central element to many of the narratives. Henry was associated particularly with children because he was born on St. Nicholas day, the patron saint of children.⁸ The cases in both sources are replete with details surrounding children's accidents including the activity, cause, first finder, witnesses, hour, date, location, and so on. Children have many accidents, then and now, so that both sources are rich ones for the study of childhood and the adults who assume responsibility for them.

In law, twelve was the age at which a child moved into adult accountability for criminal offenses and a male child was to become a member of a frankpledge (tithing group). The coroners had reason to record this age, but they carefully recorded the ages of children even when they were much younger and when they were victims of accidents rather than suspects in homicide. This eager concern with recording children's ages down to months reveals a community fascination with childhood. Not only parents, but also a jury of neighbors knew the names and ages of children, and officials were concerned enough about the innocent victims to record details of their identity and manner of death. The king did not require the information about how a child died or at what age, because his sole interest in accidental deaths was to collect the value of the *deodand*. The details recorded in the coroners' inquests, therefore, reveal community values that accorded a special status to childhood. It was only in the second half of the fourteenth century that ages of adults gradually became part of the record, but, again, not because the king required such information.

To understand the parallel nature of the coroners' inquests and the miracles, it is helpful to juxtapose two examples, chosen for their similarities rather than their dramatic events. While the basic narrative is the same, the miracle stories have added considerable colorful and emotional embellishments that were not appropriate to an official coroners' inquest. The resonances between the two texts, however, are striking.

Saturday before the Feast of St. Margaret [20 July 1322] information was given to the aforesaid Coroner and Sheriffs that a certain Robert, son of John de St. Botulph, a boy seven years old, lay dead of a death other than his rightful death in a certain shop which the said Robert (John?) held of Richard de Wirhale in the parish of St. Michael de Paternostercherch in the Ward of Vintry. Thereupon the said Coroner and Sheriffs proceeded thither and having summoned good men of that Ward and of the three nearest Wards, viz.: Douegate, Queenhithe, and Cordewanerstrete, they diligently enquired how it happened. The jurors say that when on Sunday next before the Feast of St. Dunstan [19 May] the said John (Robert?), Richard, son of John de Cheshunt, and two other boys, names unknown, were playing upon certain pieces of timber in the lane called "Kyrouneland" in the Ward of Vintry, a certain piece fell on the said John (Robert?) and broke his right leg. In the course of time Johanna, his mother, arrived, and rolled the timber off him, and carried him to the shop aforesaid where he lingered until the Friday before the Feast of St. Margaret when he died at the hour of Prime of a broken leg and of no other felony, nor do they suspect anyone of the death but only the accident and the fracture.⁹

The coroner recorded the age of the young victim, his activities, and the close presence of his mother and the place of death as the shop of his father. Family, playmates, and community were near at hand.

The record of a miracle, on the other hand, permits much editorial comment, but tells essentially the same story.

I must not pass over without mention of an important miracle which, I am told, took place through the merits of the renowned King Henry some time ago in Wiston, a Sussex town. For though I have known some of the dead coming back to life, in spite of all reluctance of nature, at the Saints' intercession, I can scarce restrain my pen: the greater the wonder which the mind feels, the richer is the matter for discourse, although in my case the emotion of my full heart is far greater than my capacity for writing the record. A girl of three years old was sitting under a large stack of firewood, in the company of other children of that age who were playing by themselves, when by a sudden and calamitous accident a huge trunk fell from the stack and threw her on her back in the mud, pinning her down so heavily as to deprive her instantly of the breath of life. It was not possible that the breath should remain in her when her whole frame was so shattered; for the trunk was of such a size that it could scarcely be moved by two grown men. You may be assured that the horror of the sight soon scattered the company of the child's friends, who forthwith ran to and fro in all directions, shewing that something untoward had occurred by their screams or their flight, not by words. Perhaps it was this warning which made the child's father come up to see what had happened: and he, looking from some distance off, could see that it was his little Beatrice who lay stretched out there. Not a little alarmed, he hastened forward and, on drawing near and finding her already carried off by so cruel death, found his face grow pale, and his heart wrung with an agony of grief: yet, lifting the log with some difficulty, he raised her in his hands. Then the fountains of his eyes were loosed, and calling his wife, he put the poor corpse in her arms. She took her unhappy burden and laid it on her bosom; and so, almost fainting in her grief, and giving expression to it with heavy groans and loud wailing, made for the church that stood hard by.

The account, which was later verified, went on to say that the mother invoked King Henry and vowed a pilgrimage to his tomb. Continued prayers brought a breath of life to the child and "she spoke to her mother, albeit with difficult utterance, complaining of the pain she felt" and "when she had drunk once of her mother's milk" she needed no other medicine.¹⁰

Both the coroners' inquests and the miracles are at pains to show the innocent nature of children in general. The coroner's reports speak of children trying to pluck feathers or flowers from streams, playing with balls, or undertaking tasks beyond their motor skills such as dipping bowls in streams to get water.¹¹ The miracles make side comments about childhood such as: "the boy, given his liberty, was playing about somewhere, as boys will, while his grandfather

was all intent upon his work," or "the boy climbed up a tree about ten o'clock in the morning, bent on some childish prank--or perhaps birds'-nesting," or "the girl, careless and mischievous as children will be. . . ." [12](#) None try to paint a picture of a holy innocence such as that of little Hugh who merrily sang *O Alma Redemptoris* on the way home from school, [13](#) but the children in these tales were not candidates for sainthood.

The miracle narratives also make a central theme of the devotion of the parents and neighbors when confronted with the loss of a child. The grandfather who had gone to the mill with his curious grandson called for him and searched all around until he found the boy in the mill race. Being too old to remove him "he made all haste to find the neighboring farmers, and collect all those whom he could get within a circuit of three furlongs." The efforts did not work until one of the onlookers, "bolder than the rest," accomplished the rescue. The parents arrived and the whole crowd fell to prayer to Henry. When a little girl accidentally hanged herself while her parents were away, the mother "called her fellow townspeople and neighbors from their houses, and, to be brief, in a short time a large crowd of both sexes had hurried into the house and were all bewailing the unfortunate mother's lot." [14](#)

The coroners' inquests also indicate that neither the parents nor the community took children's accidental deaths lightly. Both the urban and the rural coroners' inquests show community censure of parents who left children with inadequate care. The seasonality of accidents involving infants and toddlers in the countryside shows that they occurred predominantly in the harvest months, when all able-bodied people were in the fields. [15](#) The times of day (21 percent in the morning and 43 percent at noon) for the accidental death of babies (under one year of age) were times when mothers were particularly busy about the house. When not working with such intensity, however, parents tried not to leave their children alone and villagers did not approve of the practice. For example, jurors entered into the record that a child wandered outside its father's house and "was without anyone looking after him" when he drowned, or a two-year-old died when she was "left without a caretaker." Often, however, the caretaker was ill equipped to mind the child. Maude, daughter of William Bigge, was left in the care of a blind woman while her mother was visiting a neighbor. When her mother returned, she found her daughter drowned in a ditch. Parents often entrusted the care of their babies to other children. Thus a thirty-week-old child was left in the care of a neighbor's three-and-a-half-year-old son. The attention span of other children in tending to their young brothers and sisters was obviously limited. William Senenok and his wife went to church on Christmas Day 1345, leaving their infant daughter, Lucy, in a cradle and in the care of their daughter Agnes, who was three. Agnes went out into the courtyard to play and the younger child burned. In another case the villagers commented that a five-year-old boy who failed to take adequate care of his brother was a "bad custodian." [16](#)

Those who are familiar with fairy tales will already have perceived that the narratives related here are close to the typologies and the sorts of anxieties portrayed in them. A Proppian analysis would see in this commonality of narrative a thread of similar functions. The reader must allow for the dropping of some attributes of the formula because of the official nature of the records, and, although the familiar villain (a witch or wicked stepparent) is usually not present, many other elements are. One finds members of the family absent, interdictions of good behavior ignored, guilt over innocents endangered, and in some of the miracles the victim submits to deception of the devil. One tale which V. Propp analyzes in depth relates particularly to the type of narrative with which we are dealing. A girl is charged by her parents to look after her younger brother, but after amusing him for awhile, she goes into the street to play and abandons her charge. The swan-geese abducted him. The horrified little baby-sitter goes on an adventure and recovers the child from a witch. [17](#)

Even the cadence of the fairy tale or ballad is caught in the miracles. Alice Newnett, a young girl, was dying of the plague and the curate was called to give extreme unction. He concluded that she was dead already and instructed her mother and other women to prepare her for burial and sew up a shroud. But the daughter suddenly sat up in her shroud and said "Mother, have me measured with a tape longways and broadways, whence a candle may be made to King Henry's honor." The measurement made, the child was restored to health with all plague blotches gone. This folk custom of taking the measurements for a candle appeared in other miracles and won the snide remarks of the cleric who investigated the miracles as being in the "fashion ignorant folk have." [18](#)

One can well imagine that this sort of tale was related to young children looking after their even younger siblings. The stories joined those of careless children who wandered off on their own accord. The whole tradition--fairy tales, true-life misadventures, miracles, and child saints--were woven together to become part of a general culture of stories

that reinforced dangers to children and cautions to adults on childrearing.

Other narratives about childhood appear in other types of court cases such as proof of age, London's orphan court, and ecclesiastical courts, but it is best to deal with this sort of evidence as we move on to the reality of the adult community and their commitment to childrearing. It is important to realize from the beginning, however, that we are telling both true stories and plausible ones.

Nurturing of Children

The primary nurturer was female rather than male, mother rather than father. The birth of a child was exclusively in the female domain. The mother, the midwife and her assistants, female friends and kin brought the child into the world, bathed it, swaddled it, and fed it.

The religious images of the time also reflected a societal value of Mary as nurturer. The prevalent visual image of Mary was with the baby or child Jesus; devotional literature and sermons referred to the comfort of this maternal scene, and even the popular carols delighted in the maternal role for Mary, comparing her with other mothers. Joseph's paternal role was weak by comparison. Beyond the spiritual models, nurturing rested chiefly with women in the early years of a child's life. It is they who would nurse or feed the baby, wash and dress it, and soothe its crying. Early socialization in terms of talking, training, and walking would fall mostly to women, either mothers or other females around the house.

To say that women would be the primary nurturers does not mean that children did not enjoy the affection of both parents, as the coroners' rolls indicate. In accidental deaths, the first finder of the body was often recorded. Practice varied from county to county with some seeming to prefer to designate someone in the village as the "official" first finder. But in 268 cases of rural accidental deaths to children twelve and under during the fourteenth century, kin were the first finders. Of these first finders, 51 percent were mothers and 39 percent were fathers. Brothers and sisters constituted 3 percent each, and male and female kin made up 2 percent each. When the first finders are divided by the sex of the child, fathers were more likely to appear as first finders of their male as opposed to female children. Thus, in 43 percent of accidents among boys, the father found the body compared to 33 percent of the accidents among girls. The mother was first finder in 45 percent of the cases involving boys and 59 percent of the cases involving girls.¹⁹ In the London accidents, the mother was the first finder in all cases (but there are only a dozen cases).

One must avoid the temptation to rush to the conclusion that fathers cared more for their male children than their female children or that there was a special bond between mothers and daughters. The pattern of place and activity of accidental deaths dispels such conclusions.

In traditional societies the division of labor between the sexes was determined not only by the work that they did, but also by the space in which they did their work. In peasant society men did the construction, road work, digging in marl pits, and, above all, the field work. For most of the day, particularly during planting and harvest seasons, they were outside the village and away from their children. Women, on the other hand, not only took care of the children but also swept out the houses, cooked, brewed, looked after the domestic animals, tended the garden and fruit trees. These activities kept them around the house and the village and, therefore, with their children.²⁰

The activities of the children who died from misadventure also indicates the spatial division of labor. Of the fifty-eight children under one year of age appearing in the coroners' inquests, 33 percent died in fires in their cradles. The percentage drops to 14 percent for one-year-olds and to only 1 percent for two-year-old children. Unattended babies who were not in cradles also died in house fires; 21 percent of their deaths occurred in this circumstance. By one year old, however, babies were actively adventuring and even walking. Forty-six percent of the victims were described as playing with water, pots, fire, and with other children and 13 percent were described as walking when the accident occurred. As in modern accidental-death statistics for children this age, the baby boys tended to be more active and aggressive at play (63 percent of the boys' accidents compared to 54 percent of the girls' accidents).²¹ Given the sexual division of labor, the space in which women worked, and assumptions about nurturing, mothers were most likely to be the parent closest to the accidents of these infants.

By the age of two and three one can see that the children were responding to the role models around them and

identifying with parental work and space. Little girls were already becoming involved in accidents that paralleled their mother's routine, working with pots, gathering food, and drawing water (17.2 percent of their fatal accidents), even though these accidents only involved playing at these tasks. For instance, a two-year-old girl tried to stir a pot of hot water but tipped it over on herself.²² The boys were more actively involved in play and observation of men working. One three-year-old boy was following his father to the mill and drowned; another was watching his father cut wood when the ax blade came off the handle and struck him.²³ The identification with the sex roles of the parents became stronger as the boys and girls matured. Boys began to herd, imitated their father's games, and rode the plow horses to water them, while girls gathered herbs and fruit, helped with cooking and brewing, fetched water from the well and did other tasks that their mothers performed.²⁴

Rather than assigning value judgments to the motivations of the first finder, therefore, a more prosaic assessment is that the children's bodies were found by the parent who was physically closest. Since the boys were following their fathers about from the ages of two and three, the likelihood that the father would be first finder increased. The evidence suggests strong gender-linked bonds, but not necessarily value-laden preferences. It does not follow that fathers did not love and value their daughters equally or even more. They were, however, engaged in training their sons to assume their work and roles.

As the children became more mobile, the community began to take a larger role in the children's care and socialization. Again, the coroners' inquests indicate a pattern of mobility, but perhaps also visits and even childcare arrangements. The majority of fatal accidents to toddlers (49 percent) still occurred in the child's home, but 18 percent occurred in another person's home, 20 percent in public places, and 12 percent in bodies of water. As one looks at the places of death for children, the number outside the home increases, but even adolescents were still more likely to meet misadventures in their homes.²⁵

While the coroners' inquests are mostly from the fourteenth century, the miracles are from the late fifteenth century. The spiritual genre elevates the role of parents in the nurturing of children and adds dramatic, emotional outpourings to enhance the narrative. The sample size is smaller for the miracles, but it shows that the father was the first finder of the body in two cases, the mother in three and the parents jointly in four cases. Kin and neighbors found the body in four cases. A second variable is also added and that is the chief intercessor with King Henry: eight are the mothers, two the fathers, and eight the parents jointly. Neighbors appear in the rescue and prayers in eleven of the revivals. The sex of the restored victims is very even: 21 males and 19 females.²⁶ Again, a sex bias is not apparent in parental or societal nurturing of children.

Fewer children died of accidental deaths in the city than in the countryside. In part, this was because European urban centers had fewer children. Marriages were delayed until a woman had accumulated dowry from wages and a man had established a business or employment. There was also a high percentage of unmarried young people in the population. Urban centers were unsanitary environments and less healthy than the countryside for children as well as adults. Infant mortality was high. But the coroners' inquests indicate another reason for the lower number of accidental deaths. Paradoxically, London children were probably better supervised, even though their risks of dying from disease were greater than in the countryside. The child care may or may not have been organized, but the streets and houses were crowded with adults going about their business or pleasures. Parents' work was in shops located in their homes, as we have already seen in one London case, so that parents could look out for their children, rather than leaving them for periods to go to the fields or attend to domestic animals. In London, in contrast to the countryside, many of the houses had servants or tenants who lived with the family or in rented rooms. It was easier to protect London children from their own disastrous adventures because there were more eyes watching and hands restraining.

Childrearing as a community venture on the London streets appeared in both court cases and in the miracles. Thomas Saint John, for instance, had to prove that he was of age in order to claim his inheritance. He called upon the usual round of people present from his early years: his godmother, the curate who took over the year after he was baptized, the husband of his nurse, his first schoolmaster, and an apprentice of his father who knew he was a six-year-old when he arrived, and a neighbor who remembered that his younger brother was a playmate of Thomas.²⁷ Such touching scenes also appear in the miracles as in the case of Miles, the son of William Freebridge living in Aldermanbury in London. Miles, nine months old, was being carried about by a somewhat older boy who had given him a circular pilgrimage badge of St. Thomas to play with: "anon, as is the way of such, he must put it into his mouth, and, since

children love nothing better than swallowing things, he had no sooner got it in his mouth than he would have it in his belly."²⁸ Like little Saint Hugh, who begged an older school boy to teach him a hymn as they walked home from school, Miles had an older boy accompanying him.²⁹ With the presence of traffic in streets and the absence of strollers, children must have been carried, lifted, and held more in their early years than in the countryside.

London parishioners and neighbors put their lives on the line intervening where children were involved. For instance, John de Harwe, a porter, was going about his business in the street, when a young esquire came riding through at too fast a gallop and knocked down a mother and child. John took the bridle of the horse to warn the man to ride more carefully or he would kill a child. The esquire drew his sword and killed the well-intentioned neighbor.³⁰

The move to reprimand carelessness also appeared in one of the miracles. A small girl was wandering in the streets, "as children will," about eleven o'clock on the eve of Corpus Christi when a servant in the employ of nuns drove over her with a cart. "Because he drove with little prudence or care, the whole weight of the cart ran over the poor child . . . so that it left her young body shattered on the ground, well-nigh as flat as a pancake." The neighbors came to see the calamity and the distraught mother ran after the carter with "loud and reproachful cries." A neighbor woman had the presence of mind to call on Henry to revive the child.³¹

Because of the widespread assumption that infanticide was common in the Middle Ages, we cannot leave the issue of parental and community attitudes toward nurturing without assessing the issue. Evidence of an active practice of infanticide is difficult to find in medieval English court records. Of the more than four thousand cases of homicide that I have read in the coroners' inquests and criminal indictments, I have only found four cases of infanticide.³² The Church took an interest in the newborn child and prescribed penances for mothers who killed them. But studies of church court records revealed that here, too, cases of infanticide were rare.³³ The accidental deaths of 78 children under the age of one in the coroners' inquests do not indicate a pattern of willful destruction. The majority of them died in fires in their cradle or in the house, thus indicating that they were being cared for rather than exposed or drowned. If infanticides were being concealed by accidental deaths, then one would expect a higher proportion of female infants to appear among the cases, but the sex ratio is quite close with males having somewhat more accidents, as we have seen; the miracles reflect a similar pattern.³⁴

A Culture of Oversight

The sources that we have looked at so far speak to a Voluntary care and concern on the part of the family and community. No laws required parents to care for their children or for the community to come to the support of children in distress. Orphanages were non-existent, foundling hospitals rare, and child assistance programs centuries away from being. Church instructions dwelled more on honoring father and mother than on protecting children from their parents. The record sources and miracles speak of children becoming involved in accidents through no fault of the parents, and Hugh's mother is not blamed for allowing her son to walk through the Jews' quarter. If reports of infanticide are rare, those of child abuse are even rarer in the records.³⁵ Nonetheless, we will see in this section that the popular culture of nurturing children did, in some instances, translate into legal protections. Furthermore, the concern of parents and friends did not end when children moved away from home. Intervention through various formal and informal forms is observable, particularly in London, where so many young people came to further their fortunes at a far distance from their natal families.

In the absence of archival research, historians have allowed the opinions of a fifteenth-century Italian businessman to color their conclusions about both parental and community concern with children. With emotive language he commented that through "want of affection" the English put their male and female children out to "hard service" in other people's households when they were only seven to nine years of age and they bound them to seven to nine years of service in which they perform "the most menial offices." Even the wealthy put their children out and accept "strangers" into their own houses. The English responded that they sent their children off to other families so that they could learn better and be disciplined. Should they undertake such an important trust themselves, they would not be able to beat the poor youngsters sufficiently to see that they were well raised. True to his business background, the Italian opines that the English can get better service from strangers than from their own children.³⁶

His report raises several problems about childrearing that need further elaboration in this paper. One is the extent of

fostering, a second is his claim of the abandonment of children to the tender mercies of the surrogate parents, and a third is the late medieval English concept of looking after children's best interests or a love for children.

Actual fostering, that is, placing young children with another family, was common only among the nobility. Peasant children stayed with their natal families until they married or, perhaps, had a period of service or apprenticeship. Since the peasantry were the vast majority of the population (about 90 percent), fostering was not the most common experience in England. Urban children, few though they were, went into apprentice or service positions in their early to late teenage years. Some children, of course, also went to various schools. The Italian would have ignored the peasants and looked only at the urban elite and nobility. In any case, fostering arrangements did not mean abandonment of children by parents or by community.

The obvious place to look for an official culture of oversight is with regard to the protection of orphans with property. In medieval society orphans might be defined as having lost both parents, but usually the status occurred with the loss of the father (the chief source of property and wealth for the family). Our modern inclination would be to argue that these are not really orphans and to add that orphans with inheritances are not the first who need oversight and official protection. The medieval world saw the problem differently. It was not a matter of seeing a poor orphan as of no consequence, but rather legal issues which included the right to inheritance for all classes. The poor young orphan deserved the attention of charity, but the propertied orphan was more likely to be victimized.

Feudal custom, of course, gave the overlord protection (or, perhaps more accurately, the use) of a vassal's orphaned children and their inheritance. The lord was to see that the person and the property of the ward prospered and to punish those guardians who abused either. The abuses of wardship are well known and perhaps better chronicled than the interventions and rectifications. Selling the sheep or cutting down timber stands was all too tempting for a guardian of underage children. Lords found they could make an immediate profit by selling off wardships. Abuses of all kinds were hard to control, although recourse to the law had a good measure of success. Still, as Sue Sheridan Walker's work has shown, the young wards usually ended up in the care of their mothers even if the property went into other hands for the duration of the wardship.[37](#)

London law took care to protect children from unscrupulous relatives, stepparents, and guardians. The orphans of artisans and merchants along with their inheritances were taken into the hands of the mayor, aldermen, and chamberlain of London. The law stated that the mayor was responsible for the goods and well-being of the orphans, insuring that their persons, their wealth, and their marriages were arranged without detriment to them or their estates. With a cynical view of the motives of mankind, the London law stated that no one could become the guardians of orphans who could profit from their deaths. Since most of the wealth orphans inherited came from their fathers and, therefore, an older brother or the father's uncle would be in direct line to inherit in place of the orphan if it died, the mother was usually recognized as guardian of the bodies of her children.[38](#)

The material wealth, however, was usually not rewarded to the care of the mother because, again, London law stipulated that the inheritance should be returned to the orphan on reaching the age of majority along with a fair increase from the investment of the children's wealth. Since women were seldom in the market place, this meant that the goods were given to the charge of a man. If the widow remarried, however, the children and their inheritance were given into her care and that of their stepfather. But here again, law protected the children. The person, usually the stepfather, assuming the investment of the orphans' inheritance had to produce sureties that the contract would be honored or the sureties themselves would have to come up with the money for the payment to the children. Furthermore, to guard against marrying off the children and reaping a reward for the marriages, the mayor was given the right to arrange marriages that were not to the disparagement of the orphan's social and economic status. The laws were enforced, as we know from court cases that followed up those who broke the contracts.[39](#)

Londoners placed their trust in the laws guarding their orphans, in the honesty of their officials, and in the devotion of their wives. Most citizens left the designation of guardians to custom and the mayor. In the late medieval Husting Wills only 210 (out of over 1,500) men designated guardians for their children,[40](#) but their overwhelming preference (55 percent) was for the mother to assume this role. After her, the testator looked to friends (27 percent), kinsmen (8 percent),[41](#) executors (6 percent), and finally apprentices, servants, and churchmen.[42](#)

The mayor followed the same pattern when he selected guardians for the citizen's orphans. The mother was the favored guardian: 30 to 57 percent of the children were in the care of their mothers, either alone or with a stepfather. The 30 percent included the plague years of 1350-88, when a number of the mothers must have died in plague. On the whole, the mayor and aldermen seem to have made an attempt to keep the children with kin. Until the onset of plague, 61 percent of children were placed with kin. The percentage fell to 36 percent in the worst of the plague years and only gradually recovered to 54 percent by the middle of the fifteenth century. For city officials, therefore, the nurturing of children among their kin was high in their priorities in granting wardship.

In the rural context as well men favored their wives as guardians of their children: 65 percent made their wives executors and left their children in their care. In manorial courts a husband could make such an arrangement at marriage by entering the land in the wife's name as well as his own, so that she would automatically come to the control of the land and children should he predecease her while the children were still minors. As in the urban community, the juries of neighbors in manorial court oversaw the provisions for widows and orphans. The community was an active participant in the welfare of its children.⁴³

In the three classes we have looked at so far--the nobility, peasantry, and bourgeoisie--the parents of orphaned children had property and generally had kin who could look after their interests. Did oversight only mean oversight of wealthy children? The London laws clearly limited their jurisdiction to children of London citizens, but they protected destitute orphans as well as the wealthy. The city Chamberlain became responsible for the rearing of the poor, young citizens. Thus when Walter, son of Richard the cook, appeared as a vagrant orphan, the chamberlain provided for his upbringing. The mayor and other city officials showed their concern for abuses of non-citizens' orphans by hearing their cases and trying to determine if there was a way to claim the child as a citizen. If they could not, they were powerless to do anything to rectify the matter.⁴⁴ In the countryside, the prevailing ethos was for the villagers to take care of orphans if there were no immediate kin. The value of extra hands to work in the fields was of use to wealthier households and worth the investment in childrearing.⁴⁵ One cannot say that all orphans were taken care of, and, perhaps, one cannot be as optimistic as John Boswell's assessment in *The Kindness of Strangers*,⁴⁶ but an official culture reinforced a societal assumption that orphaned children should be cared for.

The other major "fostering" arrangements were apprenticeships and service. Such contracts meant that the children or adolescents left their natal homes and moved into that of their master. Many of these young people were very far from home. Of the 536 apprentices listed in the chamberlain's register from 1309 to 1312, 185, or 35 percent, had names with a place reference that was certainly from outside London. Another 221, or 41 percent, had surnames that indicated an origin outside London. The rest of the names were occupational and so are hard to identify. By the middle of the sixteenth century, 83 percent of the apprentices were from outside London, with half coming from northern and western counties.⁴⁷ Did this imply the abandonment of children to a stern taskmaster with no hope of succor?

The master/apprentice arrangement was a difficult one for both parties. For the master it meant introducing a stranger into his household and associating with him or her on a quasi-familial basis. At the same time he had to train and discipline the apprentice. For the apprentice or servant it meant breaking ties with the natal home and moving into a strange household where discipline might be more severe or expectations of training and living conditions unfulfilled. If the arrangement was compatible and the contractual parties honest about the position, it could lead to lasting familial devotion by both parties, but when the relationship soured, it fostered intense bitterness.

As in the case of orphans, the mayor and aldermen, along with the guild wardens, provided the buffer in the relationship, punishing masters who broke the contract or abused the apprentice and disciplining recalcitrant apprentices. So that the contracts and their terms were publicly known, the city enrolled apprentices and maintained courts that would intervene if the contract was broken. Apprentices or their friends could appeal to either the specific guild or to the mayor for redress.

A common complaint was that the master was not teaching the apprentice his trade. For instance, John Malmayn of Jerking complained that his master, John Coggeshale, a haberdasher, had agreed to a ten-year apprenticeship contract with him, but after four years he had learned only to make points and had been clothed only in a russet gown and an old "paltokes." He said the only work he had "was to carry a child in the streets." After four years of baby-sitting, he finally protested and was transferred to another master. Other apprentices complained that their master did not keep a

shop in London and so had not trained them; or that the master was dead and the widow did not keep up the trade; or that the master stole their money; or that the master had not enrolled them at the Guildhall and they could not establish the legal end of apprenticeship. Excessive physical punishment and failure to provide adequate food and clothing were also common complaints.⁴⁸ If no compromise could be reached that would satisfy the parents and friends of the apprentice, then the guild wardens or the mayor removed the apprentice and placed him with another master or returned the money he had paid to be trained.

The Emotional Underpinnings of Nurturing

Record sources are among the worst for assessing emotions, because they so often deal with the negative side of any relationship. When all else has failed, the parties come to court. Even the very full coroners' inquests do not describe the emotions of a mother or father as first finder of a child's body. Lamentations are not part of the inquest record. Coupled with the miracles and other sources, however, the emotional underpinnings of the nurturing culture become more apparent.

We must go back to the Italian visitor's account and listen again to what the natives told him. They were so concerned about the future of their children that they sent them to other homes where they would receive the proper discipline. Parental love need not be measured by one yardstick, they argued, and they pursued their practices in the best interests of their children. We too must move away from the assumption that only one acceptable type of relationship between parents and children can exist--an affectionate, sentimental, unquestioning bond of "modern" families. This modern sentimentality ignores the great importance that parents in former times placed on the training and placement of their children to insure their well being and, therefore, their survival and, perhaps, happiness. Happiness was certainly the subordinate category to well being and basic survival. Pre-modern parents did not assume that the state would take care of their children and provide them with an education, clothes, or even food. Their survival depended on their resources and training.

The fifteenth century saw an enormous explosion of books of advice for training children, as well as books for youth who wished to make their way up the social ladder or find profitable positions. Like the recording of ages in the coroners' inquests, the proliferation of such books and poems indicated a real societal concern about children and young people and a genuine desire to make as much out of this scarce population of youths as possible. If the lessons that the advice books offered were discipline, adherence to the ten commandments, acceptance of the social hierarchy, and subdued behavior in dress, discourse, and social interactions, these were the very goals that society expected from their children, because they promoted survival in a harsh world. If the child were recalcitrant, then the books and poems urged that parents, teachers, or others in charge of their instruction be sure not to spare the rod in correction. "Tough love," we would call it now, as we look for an excuse to force reality on children.

Discipline, corporal punishment, and fostering, however, did not imply tolerance of abuse or a lack of love for children. The presumption of continued protection and support from parents and friends appears clearly in the mayor's court rolls relating to abuse of apprenticeship. When an apprenticeship or service arrangement went fearfully wrong, the first refuge the young person sought was his or her family. He or she might run away to family homes or the father or another relative would come to London to investigate. One father complained to the mayor that his son had been apprenticed to one master who had not trained him and then sold him to another master who had beat him and not fed him so that he permanently lost the use of an arm. When the father came to complain, the master's servants beat him as well.⁴⁹ Family and community vigilance did not end with the move of the child from its natal home.

The miracle stories reinforce not only parental and community concern for children, which we have already demonstrated, but also provide lessons on the behavior expected of employers of young people. John Wall, a seventeen-year-old servant of Robert Pokeapart, "a man of honorable birth and rank," was crushed to death as he returned from London with two other young men. They were following a wagon loaded with casks of salt fish and salt which upset on John, killing him. The other two young men panicked and hid the body by the road, but remembered to bend a penny double for King Henry. Arriving home they told their guardian, Robert Pokeapart, what had happened. In the morning, he gathered several neighbors and collected the body, carrying it to town. There he exposed the body for all to see so that there would be no suspicion of the other two young men in his guardianship. Lamentations to Henry and the bent penny paid off. John Wall rose from the dead and Robert, one of his wards, and John Wall's father

went to the tomb of Henry together on a pilgrimage of thanksgiving. An abbess whose ten-year-old servant climbed a tree, "as boys are wont to do," and fell on his head, responded to the laments of the others by praying to St. Henry for his recovery. When he was restored to life, she took the boy with her on a pilgrimage to Windsor. Dame Margery Hacket, likewise, was instrumental in restoring life to her servant girl. She had sent the seven-year-old to draw water from a well that had no winch. The girl slipped in and "went to the bottom like a lump of lead." When she did not return, her mistress went looking for her in dread and found the floating bucket. She despaired of what "one old woman" could do, but thought of an active young servant at home and went to get him. He rescued the little servant and prayed to King Henry with success.[50](#)

Wills also demonstrate a continued commitment of parents and masters to their children, servants and apprentices in terms of bequests or intimate responsibilities placed on them.[51](#) But perhaps the more interesting evidence of the widespread emotional attitude toward succor of children are the more general rather than the individual bequests of dowry for poor maidens, lying-in hospitals for illegitimate births, foundling homes, and grammar schools.[52](#) The 1497 will of John Carpenter illustrates the specificity of mission that these testators felt for the children of the community. Carpenter charged the mayor, chamberlain, and commonality to take from his bequests to the city money to maintain

four boys born within the City of London who shall be called in the vulgar tongue 'Carpenters Children' to assist at divine service in the choir of the chapel aforesaid on festival days and to study at schools most convenient for them on ferial days, and that such boys shall be boarded and shall eat, drink and live within the college of the said chapel, or in another place nearby, or in the neighbourhood thereof.

He goes on to specify the amount of board for the boys and the amount paid for gowns, tunics, hose, shoes and shirts every year, as well as for bedding, laundry, and a barber. Not content with providing money for these services, he went on to require that the chamberlain hire a tutor to "supervise them in washing, shaving and other things convenient and necessary for the same boys" as well as teaching them their lessons.[53](#)

The evidence for a narrative tradition teaching and enforcing nurturing, an official policy of doing so, and a deeply embedded moral value placed on it is very persuasive. We must, however, add a caution. Just as we cannot argue that the only valid proof for the existence of childhood was a sentimental concept about children, so too must we avoid measuring the involvement of family and community in childrearing only on a "cuteness" scale of love for the life stage. The desire to preserve and nurture a child to productive adult status is equally valid and closer to the medieval view of the role of adults in treatment of children. This does not imply a lack of love and attention; indeed, it required a great deal of oversight. Furthermore, the society was well aware that sentiment could be misleading and that self-sufficiency was ultimately important. If children were to learn survival, they might themselves have more of a sense of survival than of love. A parable common to all of medieval Europe was the story of the divided horse blanket. The father instructs his son to take the horse blanket out to his grandfather who was sleeping in the stable because it was a cold night. The son returns with half the blanket. When the father inquires why he cut the blanket in two, the son explains that he is saving the other half for his father when he is old.

Notes

1. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of the Family*, trans. Robert Baldrick (London, 1962). Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York, 1977).
2. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Prioress's Tale*, VII.586-590. All Chaucer references are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd. ed., ed. Larry Benson (Boston, 1987). Subsequent references will be given by fragment and line numbers.
3. *The Miracles of King Henry VI: Being an Account and Translation of Twenty-three Miracles Taken from the Manuscript in the British Museum (Royal 13 c.viii)*, ed. Ronald Know and Shane Leslie (Cambridge, Eng., 1923). The collection of miracles was put together under the direction of Henry VII with the intention of moving toward the canonization of Henry VI. The collection of the miracle stories pertaining to children is very similar to the coroners' inquests over the death of children.
4. *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A translation of the Principal Libri Penitentiales*, trans. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (New York, 1938) has very little on the parent-child relationship. Nicholas Orme, "Children and the Church in Medieval England," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994), pp. 563-587 speaks of the sparse reference to children other than baptism and the duties of the godparents to teach the basic prayers.
5. *Miracles of Henry VI*, p. 66.
6. The recording of accidental deaths had its roots in the Anglo-Saxon practice and the Norman Conquest. The Anglo-Saxons, having a tender concern for the souls of people who died suddenly without the opportunity of confessing their sins, had imposed the deodand on the community. When someone died suddenly and violently the price of the instrument that killed him or her was charged on the community and the proceeds were to go to prayers for the salvation of the soul of the deceased. The Normans continued the practice but kept the profits for the crown. For a fuller account of the source see R. F. Hunnisett, *The Medieval Coroner* (Cambridge, 1961). The coroners' rolls are preserved in the Public Record Office in London under the classification of Just. 2. Hereafter referred to as P. R. O. Just. 2/.
7. Barbara A. Hanawalt, "The Voices and Audiences of Social History Records," *Social Science History*, 15 (1991), pp. 159-175 for a more complete discussion of the narratives to be found in coroners' inquests.
8. Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London* (New York, 1993), pp. 79-80 for a discussion of the customs surrounding St. Gregory and the boy bishops.
9. *Calendar of Coroners Rolls of the City of London, A. D. 1300-1378*, ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1913), pp. 63-64.
10. *Miracles of Henry VI*, pp. 50-54 (Latin transcript given in footnote).
11. Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Childrearing Among the Lower Classes of Late Medieval England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (1977): 1-21.
12. *Miracles of Henry VI*, pp. 35, 85, 115.
13. *Canterbury Tales*, VII.548-554. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom* (Chicago, 1982) pp. 19-47 for the character of child saints.
14. *The Miracles of Henry VI*, pp. 35-37, 116-117. See also pp. 55, 56, 85 ("The news roused the whole household; the men servants came round shouting, or ran to and fro lamenting aloud.")
15. Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York, 1986), p. 176.
16. P. R. O. Just. 2/18 ms. 42d, 45; 2/104 m. 18d.; 2/200 m. 2; 2/199. *Bedfordshire Coroners Rolls*, trans. R. F. Hunnisett, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society 41 (1961), pp. 25, 45.
17. V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin, 1968), pp. 25-29, 96-98.
18. *Miracles of Henry VI*, pp. 88, 104, 171-176, 179-181, 195.
19. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, pp. 87-89.
20. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, pp. 141-155. See also Martine Segalen, *Mari et femme dans la soci,t, paysanne* (Paris, 1980) and *Historical Anthropology of the Family*, trans. J. C. Whitehouse and Sarah Matthews (Cambridge, Eng., 1986), pp. 205-219.
21. Albert P. Iskrent and Paul V. Joliet, *Accidents and Homicide* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 23, 138.
22. P. R. O. Just. 2/113 m. 37. See also Just. 2/113 ms. 32, 33, 46.
23. P. R. O. Just. 2/109 m. 8. See also Just. 2/106 m. 1d., 2/77 m. 5d.
24. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, pp. 158-159.

25. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, pp. 272-273 for tables on children's activities and place of death; p. 171 for tables on adults.
26. Figures from *Miracles of Henry VI*.
27. *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London*, 6 vols., ed. A. H. Thomas and Philip E. Jones (Cambridge, Eng., 1926-1961), 5: 11-12, 1439.
28. *Miracles of Henry VI*, p. 164.
29. Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, VII.530: "His felawe, which that elder was than he . . ." VII.544-5: "His felawe taughte hym homward prively,/ Fro day to day, til he koude it by rote."
30. *Calendar of Coroners' Rolls of the City of London*, pp. 34-35.
31. *Miracles of Henry VI*, pp. 159-161.
32. Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300-1348* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 154-157 for a discussion of evidence for infanticide. For a discussion of the legal basis for a pardon for infanticide see Naomi D. Hurnard, *The King's Pardon for Homicide before A. D. 1307* (Oxford, 1969), p. 169. The law did not clearly state until the sixteenth century that a mother was culpable of murder when she killed her infant. Jurors were thus unsure about whether indictments could be brought or not and, if they were, what was to be done with the woman who proved to be guilty of killing her newborn child.
33. Richard H. Helmholz, "Infanticide in the Province of Canterbury during the Fifteenth Century," *History of Childhood Quarterly* 2 (1975), 384.
34. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*, p. 58. One curious figure comes from the London court of orphans. At the time that children entered wardship 780 or 45 percent were females and 951 or 55 percent of the children were male. The shortfall of females should not have occurred because of inheritance since male and female children inherited equally. The figure will need more investigation.
35. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, p. 181.
36. C. A. Sneyd, ed., *The Italian Relation of England*, Camden Society 37 (London, 1847), p. 24. One of the most naive uses of the quote is Barbara Kaye Greenleaf, *Children Through the Ages: A History of Childhood* (New York, 1978) who has distilled Ariès into a book for education students.
37. Sue Sheridan Walker, "The Feudal Family and the Common Law courts: The Pleas of Wardship in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century England," *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988), 13-31.
38. *Calendar of Letter Books of the City of London, A-L*, 11 vols., ed. R. R. Sharpe (London, 1899-1912). Hereafter referred to as Letter Book with an alphabetical number. *Letter Book C*, p. 207, *Letter Book I*, pp. 220-221. *Liber Albus: The White Book of the City of London*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley (London, 1861), pp. 95-96. See also Elaine Clark, "City Orphans and Custody Laws in Medieval England," *American Journal of Legal History* 34 (1990), 168-187.
39. *Letter Book C*, pp. 81-82; *Letter Book E*, p. 121; *Letter Book G*, p. 91.
40. *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting, London, A. D. 1258-A. D. 1688*, ed. Reginald Robinson Sharpe (London, 1889-1890) for the years 1300-1500.
41. These included uncles or aunts of the child, grandparents, elder sons, and a nephew.
42. *Letter Book G*, p. 95 (1358) records the terms of a will in a wardship enrollment. Thomas Bedyk gave to Simon Fraunceys, mercer, the wardship, custody, and marriage of his son Henry during his minority.
43. Hanawalt, *Ties That Bound*, pp. 221-225. Cicely Howell, "Peasant Inheritance Customs in the Midlands, 1280-1700," in *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe*, ed. Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk, and E. P. Thompson (Cambridge, Eng., 1976), pp. 112-155 has a good discussion on strategies of inheritance and responsibilities of the widow should she have young children.
44. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*, pp. 97, 103.
45. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound*, pp. 250-253. Adoption, as we know it, was not one of those aspects of Roman law that passed into the medieval tradition. Foundling homes were also not common although some hospitals for unwed mothers were established, thus recognizing the problem.
46. John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York, 1988).
47. *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London*, 2: xxxiii-xxxv. Steve Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989), pp. 77-84.
48. Corporation of London Record Office, hereafter referred to as CLRO with manuscript reference. MC1/2/5, MC1/2/116. See Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*, pp. 157-163 for a more complete discussion.
49. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*, pp. 146-149, 157-163.
50. *Miracles of Henry VI*, pp. 65-72, 84-87, 206-210.
51. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*, pp. 170-171 for the close relationship between masters and apprentices as seen largely in wills.
52. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*, pp. 33, 43. Charles Pendrill, *London Life in the Fourteenth Century* (1925; repr. Port Washington, N. Y., 1971), pp. 173, 183-85, 198.
53. *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London*, 6: 129-130.

