

# MOTHERHOOD AND FATHERHOOD IN THE MIDDLE AGES

## ON A DAUGHTER'S DEATH, VENICE, 1477

"My eight-year-old daughter was killed and my three-year-old son. . . . My daughter died right here. She was feeding the pigs. She was so sweet. She is dead. . . . I'll give you my daughter's beautiful shirt. Take it back to the United States. Tell them what happened here. My daughter is dead. She will never wear the shirt again." Thus spoke a Vietnamese father, in the rubble of his home, to an American camera crew. To this scene, a documentary film juxtaposes General William Westmoreland, former commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam: "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as the Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient. . . . Life is not important."<sup>1</sup>

How are we to approach the question of parental feelings in cultures distant from our own? To productive ends, medievalists have, in recent years, called into question the assumptions that had led us to project onto medieval experiences the templates of our own. For example, we have learned from our critique of white, middle-class, heterosexist, twentieth-century, U.S. feminism, that what women need and want is not the same in every time, place, and circumstance. We have gone so far as to understand even the body as a cultural construct, and we have learned a great deal in doing so. We must, however, be vigilant against the danger that, in withdrawing from the imperializing impulse which appropriates and distorts the experience of others, remaking them in our own image, we may fall into an orientalizing impulse which alienates us from the Vietnamese father or the Rwandan child.

In a classic article, Mary Martin McLaughlin documented the tender care of children in the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Without romanticizing or glossing over our distance from that culture—harsh discipline or the early separation from parents, for example—she reclaimed for medieval children the affection of their mothers and fathers. Our evidence about parental feelings relates more to sons than to daughters. A modest glimpse of a father's feeling about the death of his infant daughter is contained in the following text, the colophon of a fifteenth-century Aristotelian manuscript.<sup>3</sup> The man who wrote it was a member of the Venetian patriciate whose family included prominent physicians as well as military leaders and diplomats.<sup>4</sup> As with most families, successes were made and measured by fathers and sons, so the historical record contains little about Soriano women.<sup>5</sup> Here wife and daughter find a place.

Finis Triplex Problematum Aristotilis filosoforum summi traductio, prima  
Petri Patavii, 2a Georgii Trabazuncii, 3a Theodori Gazes greci, 2a februarii  
1477 venetiis quo die ad astra migravit fuitque sepulta filia mea Ursa 3a que

nata est 23a Ianuarii 1477 ex me Iacobo Suriano de Arimino phisico et ex Eugenia iii mea dilectissima uxore. Venetiis in contrata Sancti Pantaleonis.

Here ends the triple translation of the *Problemata* of Aristotle, greatest of philosophers (the first by Peter of Padua, the second by George of Trebizond, the third by Theodore Gaza the Greek) at Venice February 2, 1477, on which day my daughter Ursa Tertia passed over to the stars and was buried. She was born January 23, 1477 to me, Iacobo Suriano of Rimini, physician, and to my most beloved wife Eugenia. At Venice in the ward of San Pantaleone.<sup>6</sup>

Surianus must have been working at the long text for some time. He was making it for his own use and, although it may have been related to his interests in medicine, it was not an instrument of his medical practice. As a collation of one medieval and two Renaissance translations of an Aristotelian work, it represents an attentiveness to the philological dimensions of Quattrocento intellectual life. As a work of natural philosophy with persistent recourse to physical causation, it contained much information about the order of nature but little reflection about its purpose or meaning. Sorianus would have attended his dying daughter in the same house in Pantaleone parish where he kept his books and had been transcribing the text. From his account, her burial was the same day as her death. Later, he seems to have set himself to his solitary task. He copied but his mind was not far from the infant child or his bereaved wife, who was probably somewhere nearby. The child is a daughter, just ten days old but she has a place in the family, born of Eugenia and Iacobo, and baptized with a name tying her to two other female relatives. Ursa has a certain presence and power: her birth, her short life, and her death occasion the expression of her father's love for her mother and prompt him to make her a little place in his text and thus in our history. Reaching the end, the formula of the colophon with its "Here ends," brought him face to face with what had ended. The triple translation is overshadowed, for him and for us, by the triad of father, mother, and child. The day's date, calling up the date of Ursa Tertia's birth, is no longer the date of the manuscript but has become an element in her parchment epitaph.

This sad story is no basis for conclusions about fifteenth-century Italian fathers and daughters. Indeed, we must be careful and critical about making it into a story at all. Like the weeping, raging father in Vietnam, speaking to an American camera and translated with American foreign policy in mind, the evidence does not simply speak for itself. On the other hand, it speaks. Much in these incidents is distant from us but little is exotic.

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1 "Hearts and Minds," dir. Peter Davis, Rainbow Pictures, 1974.

2 Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries" in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd deMause (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974), pp. 101-181.

3 London, British Library, MS Additional 21978, Aristotle, *Problemata*, 3 translations by [Bartholomew of Messina, attrib. to] Peter of Abano, George of Trebizond, and Theodore Gaza, fol. 110ra. See Georges Lacombe, Aleksander Birkenmajer and Lorenzo Minio-Paluello, *Aristoteles Latinus: Codices*, Union Académique internationale, Corpus philosophorum Medii Aevi, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Academia, 1955), cod. # 1674.

4 A note at fol. [1]ra of the same manuscript mentions a brother who is a physician ("Die 16 februarii 1478 secundum cursum terre firme obiit florentie frater meus magister Franciscus fiscus."); Hieronimo Suriano, a physician, edited medical books in Venice around 1500. See also Raffaele Adimari, *Sito riminese*, *Historiae Urbium et Regionum Italiae Rariores* 94, n.s. 10 (Brescia: Gio. Battista & Ant. Bozzoli, 1616; repr. Bologna: Aldo Forni, 1974), bk. 2, pp. 99-100; Stanley Chojnacki, "In Search of the Venetian Patriciate: Families and Factions in the Fourteenth Century" in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. J. R. Hale (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), pp. 47-90.

5 Adimari, p. 100, mentions an epitaph recorded before 1576: "Andriolae Curr. Uxori Dulcis Jacobus Surianus Ariminensis Physicus sibi liberis postque suis posuit," which may well refer to the author of the colophon and his family.

6 The *Catalogue of Additions to the Manuscripts in the British Museum in the Years MDCCLIV-MDCCLX: Additional MSS. 19,720-24,026* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1875), #21978, reads *strata* for *contrata*. Like the *Catalogue* and Paul Oskar Kristeller, comp. *Iter Italicum Accedunt Alia Itinera: A Finding List of Uncatalogued or Incompletely Catalogued Humanistic Manuscripts of the Renaissance in Italian and Other Libraries*, vol. 4 (London: Warburg Institute; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), p. 108, my translation ignores the minims (iii), which might be rendered "tria."

## MATERNAL REFLECTIONS ON GENDER AND MEDIEVALISM

As Karma Lochrie, Gillian Overing, and Clare Lees argued in Issue 22 of MFN, feminists practicing medieval studies must continually reach out of our discipline as well as out of the academy to engage a feminist dialogue that cultivates "a recreation of a sense of community that has characterized feminist endeavor and debate."<sup>1</sup> While the collaborative authors focused most of their attention on expanding feminist dialogue within the academy, I would like to offer the following reflections about the possible effects of our work outside the academy.

I produced my completed dissertation and my second child almost simultaneously. My dissertation reads psychoanalytic and gender theory against Anglo-Saxon poetic and visual texts to show that the maternal provides an initial point from which to depart the hierarchical and limiting opposition of masculine/feminine. I read maternal performances within the Anglo-Saxon poetic and visual texts to reveal not only their own disruptive possibilities but the possibility of reading other genders, as yet undescribed and untheorized, into these and other texts.

As I wrote about maternal performances in Anglo-Saxon art and poetry, I engaged in my own maternal performance of concluding a pregnancy and nurturing my older daughter, and I often found the connections and collisions between my academic work and my parenting work to be jarring and disconcerting. My husband and I are raising our family in a country plagued