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**THE PURIFICATION OF WOMEN AFTER
CHILDBIRTH:
A WINDOW ONTO MEDIEVAL PERCEPTIONS OF
WOMEN***

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In the second quarter of the thirteenth century Bishop Roger Niger found it necessary to issue a statute in the archdeaconry of London regarding the rite known as the Purification of Women after Childbirth, more commonly spoken of today as *churching*. This blessing of a recently delivered mother took place at the church door and usually marked her first appearance in church since her confinement. It had come to the bishop's attention that women were seeking this sacramental in parishes other than their own. They were fleeing their home parishes out of "hatred or fear of the curate, or in order to avoid injury or scandal" after having become pregnant (Powicke and Cheney 336 #16).¹

A case that might have engendered such hatred and fear is cited by Robert Grosseteste of Lincoln Diocese in a statute issued in 1239. Apparently in that diocese some priests were extorting funds from new mothers who were reputed to have engaged in sexual intercourse before their purification by forcing them to "bring an offering to the altar" at all the purifications that occurred in the parish (Powicke and Cheney 272 #27).² This must have been both costly and degrading for the women involved, yet Grosseteste cites

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it as an example of priestly greed apparently unmindful of the implications of such actions for the lives of the women involved.

These statutes suggest a complex interaction between male clerical perceptions of the rite of post-partial purification and women's own perceptions. It is those perceptions I wish to explore here.

Manuals of confession and pastoral care, having been written by clerics educated in the theological and law schools, shed light upon the understanding and attitudes of educated clerics concerning this rite. Designed to assist priests in carrying out their pastoral duties as confessors to the faithful, the manuals were also instrumental in shaping their attitudes and practices. Evidenced in these manuals is a complex understanding of the rite of post-partial purification.

The manuals treat post-partial purification in their discussion of sexual abstinence between married partners. These thirteenth- and fourteenth-century prescriptions regarding sexual abstinence have their roots in the penitentials, which, in turn, reflect traditions concerned with ritual purity inherited from the church Fathers.³ There menstruating women are to do penance if they should enter a church or receive communion (e.g., *Canons of Theodore* 1.14.17; *Penitential of Cummean* 2.30; *Old Irish Penitential* 2.36), as are women who do so "before the purging of blood after childbirth" (e.g., *Excarpus of Cummean* 3.15; *Penitential of Cummean* 2.31; *Canons of Theodore* 1.14.18; *Penitential of Egbert* 7.1). Men who have intercourse with women at these times are also penalized (e.g., *Canons of Theodore* 1.14.19; *Penitential of Bede* 3.37; *Excarpus of Cummean* 3.16; *Old Irish Penitential* 2.36).⁴ The prescribed period of abstinence after childbirth varies from penitential to penitential. Some fix the period at forty days, others vary it according to the sex of the infant.⁵

But the writers of the manuals of confession and pastoral care shift perceptibly from the penitentials in their approach to the sexual abstinence associated with post-partial purification. Thomas Chobham's *Summa confessorum* exemplifies this shift. Although Chobham, in accord with the penitentials, considers it a mortal sin for a married couple to have intercourse before the new mother has been purified, he asserts that the woman should render the marriage debt if she fears her husband is in danger of falling into fornication (A.7 D.2 q.2a cap.3).⁶ Even if she is still suffering post-partial bleeding she should immediately seek purification in order to render the debt (A.7 D.2 q.10a).⁷ His justification for subordinating the rules inherited from the penitentials to the primacy of the marriage relationship is a statement attributed to Gregory I, which Gratian incorporated into the

Decretum that states: "If a woman should enter church the same hour in which she has given birth in order to give thanks she does not sin" (A.7 D.2 q.2a cap.3).⁸ William of Pagula's *Summa summarum* (3.57) offers similar advice. The *Manipulus curatorum* by Guido de Monte Rocherii (fol. 198r) and John de Burgh's *Pupilla oculi* (VII, cap.v, E) go further in that they do not consider intercourse at this time to be a mortal sin, "provided that," as the *Manipulus* states, "the limits of matrimony are not transgressed."⁹ Nevertheless, they still counsel abstinence unless fornication is feared.

Although Gregory I's departure from the inherited purity rules can be traced to the sixth or seventh century,¹⁰ it was not until the *Responsa Gregorii* were incorporated into Gratian's *Decretum* that Gregory's stance would become widely accepted and disseminated (Franz II: 217).¹¹ Even the reform canonists Burchard of Worms (19.140–41) and Ivo of Chartres (15.151) subscribed to the purity rules of the penitentials when it came to post-partial purification and menstruation. Gratian's was an innovative approach to marital abstinence. Drawing upon the recently rediscovered principles of Roman Law (see Broomfield xii; Christensen xi, xiii), he shifted the emphasis from the concern with sin found in the penitentials to questions of legal rights and obligations, subordinating the purity rules of the penitentials to the primacy of the marriage relationship (Brundage, *Sex, Law and Marriage* III, 205; II, 11). This was to have a profound effect upon the writers of the manuals of confession and pastoral care, in particular, in the reduction of the periods of sexual abstinence they required, and the prominence of marital abstinence in their treatment of marriage (Brundage, *Sex, Law and Marriage* III, 205).

Gratian's approach to the issues relating to marriage and sexuality reflected a larger movement of social, intellectual, and theological developments taking place in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries (Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society* 234), the same impetus which gave birth to the manuals of confession and pastoral care (Goering 290; Tentler 32). One of the more remarkable of these was the change in attitude toward marriage. Key to this change, according to Michael Sheehan (457), was the effort by canonists to give structure to this institution.¹² At the centre of this was the shift from a coital to a consensual model of marriage, making the relationship between the spouses of prime importance (Sheehan 458; Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society* 234, 269, 273–74). It is in the incorporation of this new attitude toward marriage that the writers of the manuals of confession and pastoral care shift from the penitentials in their approach to post-partial sexual abstinence.

Adolph Franz asserts that Gregory I's stance, especially after it was adopted by Gratian, and through him, Innocent III,¹³ was responsible for liberating Christian thought regarding menstruating and post-partial women from Levitical blood taboos. According to Franz, Gregory's was an "encouraging advance in the assessment and high estimate of Christian women" (II, 215-17).¹⁴ However, alongside this flexibility regarding post-partial abstinence in the manuals of confession and pastoral care are strong prohibitions against sexual commerce with post-partial women. For example, Chobham insists that it is dangerous to sleep with a menstruating woman because from such a union leprous offspring are born, and it is "most shameful" to lie with a puerperal woman while she suffers a "flow of menstrual blood" because hers is an issue of "impure humour" (A.7 D.2 q.2a cap.3).¹⁵ William of Pagula in his *Summa summarum* asserts that intercourse while a woman is nursing breeds infirm and leprous offspring (3.57).¹⁶ John of Kent's *Summa de penitentia* warns that intercourse with an unpurified woman can cause bad things to happen to the couple, including infertility and weakness (fols. 226^vb-227^ra).¹⁷

These fears and beliefs are not new to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; they can be dated to the first centuries of Christianity, as is evidenced in the canons of the first Nicene Council where it is stated:

For husbands it is not allowed that they approach their wives during menstruation, so that their bodies and their children will not manifest the effects of elephantiasis and leprosy; in fact that type of blood corrupts both the body of the parents as well as that of their children. (quoted in Niccoli 10)¹⁸

But these fears and beliefs found reinforcement in the new information on reproductive biology that became available in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries through the recovery and translation into Latin of Arabic and Greek texts (Brundage *Law, Sex and Christian Society* 421; Cadden 158; Thomasset 44-46; Franz I, 218). The works of Aristotle and Galen in particular shaped late medieval thought regarding menstruating and post-partial women (see Thomasset; McLaughlin 215-16; Wood 715). Aristotle considered menstrual blood to be formless matter, semen to be pure male form.¹⁹ Conception occurred when semen imposed its form upon menstrual matter, creating a fetus in its pure male image. If intercourse occurred when the menses was less fresh and less sensitive to form, females, Aquinas's "defective males," would be conceived. If conception occurred at the end of the menstrual cycle during which menstruation occurred, when the menstrual matter was considered to be severely compromised, grotesquely defective

forms could be spawned. Here was a scientific rationale for the received proscriptions against intercourse during menstruation and the post-partal period (Wood 716).

Galen attributed a more active role to the female in conception, determining that a child was formed from a mixture of male and female seed, which was then nourished in the womb by menstrual blood. But both he and Aristotle agreed that menstrual blood was diverted to the breasts and became milk after the child was born (Crawford 58-59). This connection between menstrual blood and breast milk also reinforced the inherited proscriptions against intercourse during the post-partal period (Jacquart and Thomasset 72). But rather than concern for ritual purity, sexual abstinence is now prescribed for scientific reasons. For "it was thought that copulation would drive the menstruum back to the womb, and so deny sustenance to the child at the breast" (Crawford 52).

Eleanor Commo McLaughlin asserts that the adaptation of Aristotelian biology and androcentric anthropology by Aquinas and his contemporaries gave a scientific basis to the antifemale tradition inherited from the church Fathers, making it even more androcentric (216).²⁰ And indeed the authors of the manuals of confession and pastoral care perpetuate inherited blood taboos with scientific rationalizations. Yet, as we have seen, they do not adhere rigidly to those taboos, subordinating them to the primacy of the marriage relationship. But was this necessarily beneficial to women as Franz asserts?

The extant sources we have suggest that the rite of the purification of women after childbirth crystallized somewhere around the eleventh century, the same time that the concept of marriage was shifting (Franz II, 223). While Walter von Arx (65) attributes this to the notions of ritual and moral impurity of the puerperal woman propagated by the penitentials, Susan Karant-Nunn suggests "the introduction of churching may correspond in complex ways to a deterioration in women's position in society, to the triumph of Catholicism within a heavily folk milieu, and to the expansion of the cult of the Virgin" (5).²¹ Although Karant-Nunn's point is that the development of the rite of post-partal purification reflected and reinforced that deteriorating position, thus implying it was imposed upon women from above, there is another possible interpretation. Historians of women have demonstrated that the new focus on the primacy of the marriage relationship that occurred in these centuries subjected women to new political, legal, economic, and social disadvantages.²² But women, no less than men, respond to their environments by conforming to, maneuvering within, and resisting

the constraints placed upon them (Davis and Farge; Scribner 182). While the rite of post-partial purification may be seen as reflecting and reinforcing women's deteriorating position in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, women may also have found this rite to be empowering. Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb (14-17) have questioned the tendency of modern scholars to ignore the possibility that menstrual taboos and pollution beliefs could enhance rather than suppress women's influence and power, and suggest that women themselves may have been responsible for originating them in some societies to serve their own interests. Even in those societies where that is not the case, these taboos and beliefs could at least be manipulated by women toward their own ends. Viewed from this perspective, it is possible that rather than being imposed from above by a male clerical hierarchy, women played a large part in the development of the rite of post-partial purification at this time.

In suggesting this I take my lead from the early modernists. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also imposed constraints upon women as restrictive marriage laws were enacted, female guilds dwindled, and the gap between domestic space and productive labour widened.²³ Despite its "popish" origins and potentially derogatory focus on purification, women in the post-Reformation period continued to seek purification after childbirth (see Coster 386; Rushton 127; Cressy 122-23, 125, 127). Adrian Wilson, drawing upon an insight of Natalie Zemon Davis, suggests that the attraction of this rite for women lay in the way it, as part of the "ceremony of childbirth," reversed gender relations (Wilson 85-93; Davis, "Women on Top" 145). Early modern sources show that at the time of confinement and lying-in a new mother was surrounded by a company of women (Wilson; Cressy 111-17). Within that company the midwife's authority superseded that of the husband, and that of the attending women regardless of their social status. Gail McMurray Gibson points out that medieval midwives, in fact, had a "quasi-clerical status" in that they were empowered by episcopal license to baptize dying infants, and canon law required that they be instructed in the words and form of baptism (150). The husband, excluded from the birthing process, was expected to assume his wife's household responsibilities during the lying-in period. As well, his conjugal rights were suspended. According to Wilson, the individual wife would not have been able to make her husband conform to these expectations "since he held the final sanction of the law: but collective action could wrest back for women certain rights and victories" (96).

The final act of the company of women was to accompany the new mother to the door of the church on the day she was to participate in the rite of purification. Even while this rite signalled the end of the time a woman spent in this exclusively female society occasioned by her pregnancy and delivery, it validated that society and the roles women played within it in the public forum (Wilson 92; Gibson 149).

Medieval birthing practices were similarly the reserve of women. This is illustrated in the iconography of the period that depicts birthing scenes populated solely by women (e.g., see Duby 81, 221, 248, 540), and is emphatically asserted in the introductory remarks of a fifteenth-century English woman's handbook of obstetrics and gynecology:

And therefore, in helping of women I wyl wright of women prevy sekenes the helpyng, and that oon woman may helpe another in her sykenesse & nought diskuren her previtees to suche vncurteys men. (Rowland 58)

As is evidenced by Robert Grosseteste's statute of 1239 with which I began this discussion, by the second quarter of the thirteenth century it was already a well-established custom in England for a company of women to accompany new mothers when they were purified.²⁴ Although it may appear to us that this act reflected and reinforced medieval women's inferiority, just as it can be argued that early-modern women may have perpetuated the practice of post-partal purification because it served their own interests, it is possible that this rite crystallized in the eleventh and twelfth centuries through the efforts of women in reaction to the political, legal, economic, and social disadvantages they were experiencing.

Of course, many factors contribute to the development and perpetuation of a rite such as post-partal purification. It would be a gross oversimplification to suggest either that this rite derived purely from a female effort to subvert gender stereotypes and roles or a male clerical hierarchy's attempt to impose them. Grounded in Levitical blood taboos and the patristic ambivalence towards sex, shaped by the penitentials, and influenced by the intellectual and theological developments of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, the clerical understanding of post-partal purification evidenced in the manuals of confession and pastoral care is complex, both subverting and reinscribing the gender stereotypes and roles they had inherited.

Although the evidence regarding lay women's understanding of this rite is much more circumstantial, I hope to have demonstrated that it was no less complex. I do not dispute Karant-Nunn's assertion that "women absorb

the valuation that society places upon them," and certainly agree with her assessment that medieval and early-modern women were most likely "not 'feminists', women seething with frustration at a culture that so hedged them about with negative judgments and limitations on their prerogatives" (25-26). However, as suggested earlier, women, no less than men, respond to their environments by conforming to, maneuvering within, and resisting the constraints placed upon them. Subscribing to, and elaborating upon, inherited blood taboos and purification beliefs surrounding childbirth may have signalled medieval women's conformity to prevailing gender stereotypes.²⁵ We cannot, however, ignore the fact that the rite of the purification of women after childbirth also provided an opportunity to subvert prevailing gender roles.

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NOTES

¹ "Si mulier inpregneretur in aliqua parochia, et odio capellani sui vel timore ducta, vel ut dampnum vel scandalum vitet, ad aliam parochiam fugerit, non admittatur ad purificationem irrequisito assensu sui capellani a cuius parochia exivit. Qui si difficilem se exhibuerit, licentietur ab archidiacono vel eius officiali, et hoc fiat salvo iure ecclesie su parochialis."

² "Auidimus autem, unde non mediocriter dolemus, quod quidam sacerdotes extorquent peccuniam a laicis pro penitentia seu aliis sacramentis ministrandis; et quod quidam turpis lucri plenas iniungunt penitencias: quales sunt quod mulier cognita a viro post partum ante suam purificationem deportet deinceps oblationem ad altare cum qualibet muliere purificanda in eadem parochia."

³ Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society* chs. 1-3, discusses this heritage, which combined Gnostic, Stoic, and Levitical elements.

⁴ Of the penitentials I surveyed only two mention women in this regard and there is no penance assigned, only an admonition to abstain. See the *Penitential of Egbert* 7.1 and the *Bigotianum* 2.9.3.

⁵ More than half of the penitentials studied by Flandrin 17, fix this period at forty days. Of those I surveyed, the *Excarpus of Cummean*, the *Canons of Theodore*, and the *Penitential of Egbert* prescribe a 40-day period, whereas the *Penitential of Cummean* prescribes thirty-three days abstinence after the birth of a boy, sixty-six for a girl; the *Penitential of Bede* thirty and forty respectively.

⁶ "Verumtamen sciendum est quod si vir petat debitum ab uxore sua puerpera et ipsa timeat de lapsu viri, consilium est ut statim accedat ad purificationem et statim reddat debitum."

⁷ "Statim accedat ad purificationem et sic debitum reddat. Non enim est certum tempus institutum mulieribus purificandis, sed quando voluerit se potest purificare."

⁸ "Si mulier eadem hora qua genuerit ecclesiam introeat gratias actura, nullo pondere peccati gravatur."

⁹ "Non tamen credo quod in isto casu sit peccatum mortale, dum tamen non tra[n]s-grediatur limites matrimonii."

¹⁰ There has been some debate as to whether this interchange occurred between Augustine of Canterbury and Gregory I in the sixth century, or should be attributed to Theodore of Canterbury, or someone associated with him, in the seventh. See Meyvaert.

¹¹ Gratian refers to Gregory's stance toward post-partial purification in D.5 of the *Decretum* to support his teaching that natural law (law contained in the Scriptures) can change and that the Old Testament prohibitions are no longer strictly applicable in a Christian society. In contrast to the Old Testament Law, women are not now prohibited from entering a church immediately after giving birth, nor are menstruating women prohibited from entering church or receiving communion. See Christensen xxii-xxiii.

¹² Regarding the motives behind this development see Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society* 183; Tentler 220. A related reform occurring at this time that was bound to influence clerical attitudes toward sex and sexuality was the effort to abolish clerical marriage, eliminate clerical concubinage, and establish clerical celibacy as the norm. See Brundage *Law, Sex and Christian Society* 182-83. This effort is visible in a 1225 decree promulgated in Canterbury denying priests' concubines Christian burial, the kiss of peace and the blessed bread at mass, and the right to post-partial purification until they have denounced and repented their way of life. See Powicke and Cheney 154.

¹³ Innocent's canon that summarizes Gratian was issued at Lateran in 1198 and is included in *Liber Extra* 3.47.1: "si mulieres, post prolem emissam acturae gratias ecclesiam intrare voluerint, nulla proinde peccati mole gravantur, nec est ecclesiarum eis aditus denegandus, ne poena illis converti videatur in culpam. Si tamen ex veneratione voluerint aliquamdiu abstinere, devotionem earum non credimus improbandam." See Friedberg II, 262.

¹⁴ "Einen erfreulichen Fortschritt in der Würdigung und Hochschätzung der christlichen Frau" (216).

¹⁵ "Similiter periculosum est dormire cum menstruata, quia inde nascitur partus leprosus. Similiter turpissimum est iacere cum muliere iacenti in puerperio dum laborat profluvio menstrui sanguinis, quia puerpera diu habent fluxum immundi humoris."

¹⁶ "Ideo autem prohibetur illis temporibus commiseri eis quia ex tali coitu nascitur morbosus et leprosi."

¹⁷ "Sic caue, quia consimilis casus in aliquibus potest contingere, ut in extinctione seminis, et infirmitate parentum, et prohibitione legisque transgressione."

¹⁸ This appears to be a Christian innovation. These proscriptions go beyond Levitical blood taboos. In the book of Leviticus there is no mention of leprosy or other infirmity resulting from intercourse with menstruating or post-partial women. See Niccoli 9-10; Flandrin 74-75; Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society* 156. The *Natural History* of the elder Pliny speaks of the dangers menstruating women pose to the people and things around them including souring wine, tarnishing mirrors, making dogs go mad, and killing men who have intercourse with them at certain phases of the moon, but it does not mention danger to the fetus. See Flandrin 73-74; Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society* 156.

¹⁹ I owe this explanation of Aristotelian biology to Wood 715-16.

²⁰ Similarly, Lemay speaks of "the development of scientific misogyny" in this period (35-49). Murray more positively suggests that the churchmen of this era, as evidenced

by the manuals of confession and pastoral care, sought in these scientific texts reasonable explanations for an inherited blood taboo (216).

²¹ I am grateful to Professor Karant-Nunn for sharing this forthcoming essay with me.

²² See Stuard; Atkinson 201; McLaughlin 225-29; L'Hermite-Leclercq 213-20, 226-29; Vecchio 105-35; Bennett, "Public Power and Authority", also *Women in the Medieval English Countryside* 7.

²³ See Roper; Goldberg 261, 267-68, 331; Davis, "Women in the Crafts", also "Women on Top" 88-89; Wiesner, "Women's Response", also *Women and Gender* 82-114; Bennett, "Medieval Women, Modern Women." Some authors, including Willen, Chrisman, and Porterfield, argue that the Reformation's focus on the family offered women a new prominence and authority. However, when examined, it is informal or indirect power they are speaking of, the power to influence family members, rather than legal, economic, or political power. Harrington suggests that rather than a reformation of marriage, Protestant reforms "represented the final reception of a holy, indissoluble, and consensual ideal of marriage" promulgated in the twelfth century (49).

²⁴ A collection of customs of the diocese of Salisbury recorded sometime before 1256 also describes this custom: "Mulieres desponsate et mulieres post partum nutrices debent accedere ad ecclesiam cum candelis accensis et ille mulieres sequentes [emphasis added] debent offerre crismalia infantium." See Powicke and Cheney 512 #5.

²⁵ Marcia Westcott warns against equating consciousness and activity when considering women's behaviour in a society where they are limited in their ability to implement their consciousness through activity. Westcott suggests that "women's unique interpretation of their own conforming behavior affects that behavior in ways that are intelligible only through reference to women's consciousness itself" (429).

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