

# Parenting Was for Life, Not Just for Childhood: The Role of Parents in the Married Lives of their Children in Early Modern England

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## Abstract

Marriage is a false dividing line to impose on our understanding of childhood, adulthood and parenting in the past. In early modern England neither the dependency which has been associated with childhood, nor the supervision of parents in the lives of their children, ceased with wedding bells. An examination of the parent–child bond beyond marriage within the middle and upper ranks can provide new and important insights into the intergenerational relationships of the early modern past. While parents could contribute to the smooth running of their children’s marriages, they could also have a role as instigators of, commentators upon, and arbitrators of the discord which could result in their children’s marriages. Motives for parental involvement could be complex, but parents could share in both the sorrows and the joys of their children’s marriages. The emotional and financial repercussions of marriage breakdown could have painful effects for parents as well as for the married couple.

**A**n important aspect of our understanding of the relationships between members of the early modern English family has been absent from recent histories. Powerful bodies of historical scholarship have combined to ensure that the role of English parents in the married lives of their children has been neglected. Demographers, keen to dismiss the myth that households in the past contained many generations of the same family living under one roof, have shown that most households in the early modern period were simple or nuclear in structure. Parents and their married children, it has been demonstrated, were rarely co-resident. Relationships with kin, of both first and second

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degree, were 'loose' and 'shallow'. The average late age of marriage, low life expectancy and the mobile nature of the population increased the probability that parents would have died before their children married, or were too geographically distant to bear significant influence.<sup>1</sup> Yet even as our understanding of the role of kin in family life during the early modern period has become more sophisticated, our knowledge of the relationships between those kin closest to the married couple has remained limited. The historians of childhood, youth and parenting have defined the parameters of their studies in such a way as to exclude examination of these relationships after marriage. Childhood and youth have been designated stages in the life cycle characterized by the ideals of dependence and subordination to elders, with marriage as a key point of exit from that dependence into the relative freedoms of adulthood. Whilst recognizing that leaving home could be a gradual process, with some children temporarily moving away for schooling, training or to go into service, historians still portray marriage as the point of no return when the break from parental control was completed. Historians of parenting, taking their lead from the influential work of Linda Pollock, have seen marriage of offspring as a convenient termination point for their research. Despite considerable interest in the role of parents in their children's marriage choices, they have rarely pursued these relationships beyond the wedding celebration.<sup>2</sup>

Until now, the numerous ways in which parents could become involved in the day-to-day lives of their married children have only been appreciated by historians of the nineteenth-century family.<sup>3</sup> But there is much

<sup>1</sup> P. Laslett, 'Mean Household Size in England since the Sixteenth Century', *Household and Family in Past Time*, ed. P. Laslett and R. Wall (Cambridge, 1972); K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525–1700* (1979), pp. 83–102; K. Wrightson, 'Kinship in an English Village: Terling, Essex 1500–1700', *Land, Kinship and Life Cycle*, ed. R. M. Smith (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 313–32; D. Cressy, 'Kinship and Kin Interaction in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 113 (1986), 38–69. M. Chaytor, in 'Household and Kinship: Ryton in the Late 16th and Early 17th Centuries', *History Workshop Journal*, x (1980) [hereafter Chaytor, 'Household and Kinship'], 25–60, pointed out that evidence of household structure may tell us little about the quality and complexity of family relationships.

<sup>2</sup> R. Wall, 'The Age at Leaving Home', *Journal of Family History* [hereafter *JFH*], iii (1978), 181–202; L. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent–Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge, 1983); I. K. Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (1994), pp. 54–9, 62–7, 208, 227–30; P. Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England 1560–1640* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 1, 28; A. Davin, 'What is a Child?', *Childhood in Question: Children, Parents and the State*, ed. A. Fletcher and S. Hussey (Manchester, 1999), p. 28. An important recent exception to this trend of historical interpretation is I. K. Ben-Amos, 'Reciprocal Bonding: Parents and their Offspring in Early Modern England', *JFH*, xxv (2000) [hereafter Ben-Amos, 'Reciprocal Bonding'], 291–312, but this still neglects the role of parents in their children's marital relationships beyond their formation.

<sup>3</sup> M. Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971) [hereafter Anderson, *Family Structure*], esp. ch. 10; L. A. Tilly, 'Linen was their Life: Family Survival Strategies and Parent–child Relations in Nineteenth-century France', *Interest and Emotion: Essays on the Study of Family and Kinship*, ed. H. Medick and D. W. Sabeau (Cambridge, 1984), p. 312; S. Ruggles, *Prolonged Connections: The Rise of the Extended Family in Nineteenth-century England and America* (Madison, 1987); B. Reay, 'Kinship and the Neighbourhood in Nineteenth-century Rural England: The Myth of the Autonomous Nuclear Family', *JFH*, xxi (1996), 87–104.

evidence from early modern records to show that parents could play a crucial role in expanding the social and economic horizons of a newly married couple. This was a role which had often been established prior to marriage since it was frequently during the course of working for their subsequent fathers-in-law that men met their future brides. John Whitehead had been employed by Thomas Watts, a tailor in Southwark, Surrey, when he met Thomas's daughter, Elizabeth. After the couple married in 1661, they continued to live in Thomas's house, with John remaining in Thomas's employment.<sup>4</sup> Living with one or both sets of parents for a short period immediately following marriage was not unusual. During this crucial early period of marriage, the provision of accommodation meant that parents could learn about and witness at first hand the developing relationship between their children and marriage partners. For newly married men within the middling sorts, living in close proximity to their wives' families could present a host of new business opportunities. As Margaret Hunt has shown, kin gained through marriage could offer business loans, expertise, personnel and wider social networks.<sup>5</sup> If business took a turn for the worse, then parents could offer financial help or practical assistance. In June 1732 Jane Adams returned to her father's house in Staffordshire with her three children when her husband was 'failing in circumstances'. She was maintained by her father for a year, while her husband made visits two or three times a week. Lower down the social scale this type of parental support may have been vital in tiding couples over periods of financial crisis, enabling them to avoid dependency on poor relief.<sup>6</sup>

For those who were literate, and could afford the time and expense, letter writing and visits meant that parents maintained contact with their married children. The diary of the nonconformist minister Ralph Josselin (1617–83) reveals how he and his wife heard regular news of their married daughters, and recounts details of visits both from and to their families.<sup>7</sup> Many parents, such as Lady Mary Peyton who wrote to her married daughter in 1633, were eager to impart advice based upon their own experiences on how to achieve marital harmony.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, published parental wisdom about the secrets of a happy marriage, and, in particular, good motherhood, became a popular literary genre in the early modern period.<sup>9</sup> The birth of grandchildren gave parents renewed interest in their

<sup>4</sup> Lambeth Palace Library, Court of Arches [hereafter CA], Case 9909 (1668), Eee3, fos. 674v–675r.

<sup>5</sup> M. R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), p. 153.

<sup>6</sup> Public Record Office, High Court of Delegates [hereafter DEL] 1/551 (1749), fo. 167. All spellings from court records have been modernized for ease of comprehension.

<sup>7</sup> A. Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin: A Seventeenth-century Clergyman* (Cambridge, 1970) [hereafter Macfarlane, *Family Life*], pp. 113–17.

<sup>8</sup> R. A. Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450–1700* (1984) [hereafter Houlbrooke, *English Family*], p. 187.

<sup>9</sup> B. S. Travitsky, 'The New Mother of the English Renaissance: Her Writings on Motherhood', *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, ed. C. N. Davidson and E. M. Broner (New York, 1980), pp. 35–6.

children's marriages, and a new opportunity for involvement in their lives. It was not unusual practice for daughters to return to their parental home for the birth of their first children, and mothers could play an important role in organizing and managing the lying-in chamber. This form of motherly support was so central to a woman's world that wives whose husbands prevented their mothers or other female relatives from assisting them during pregnancy and childbirth complained to the church courts that this was a form of marital cruelty. Grandparents could assist in the upbringing of their grandchildren or, as in the case of the grandparents of Simonds D'Ewes (1602–50), become the sole carers.<sup>10</sup> The emotional investment of some parents in the family lives of their married children is made clear in the autobiography of the nonconformist minister Henry Newcome (born 1627). He recorded with distress the 'affliction and shame' of discovering that his son and wife had abused 'little Jane', their daughter and his granddaughter.<sup>11</sup>

The flow of economic, social and emotional support between parents and children was not one way. As Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos has shown, the concept of reciprocity was central to the parent-child relationship in this period. Adam Eyre (1614–61), for example, noted in his diary the many visits of his father-in-law, who he always referred to as 'my wive's father'. His father-in-law often brought gifts with him; on one occasion 'a quarter of a lamb', on another 'some roots and other things'. But these kindnesses were reciprocated. In October 1648 Adam visited his father-in-law at his house because he was 'sick', and in January 1649 Adam accompanied his father-in-law to the quarter sessions at Wakefield to support him in a dispute over an apprentice.<sup>12</sup> Many married children heeded the advice of conduct book writers to take care of their parents in old age.<sup>13</sup> This could involve the provision of accommodation, especially for widowed parents. While historians of the elderly have warned against interpreting this acceptance of support from children as necessarily evidence of need or dependency on the part of the older generation, it could mark a decisive shift in the power relations between parent and child. As parents became more reliant on their children, the balance of power within families could alter. An indication of this was that if widowed parents announced their intention to remarry, child obedience

<sup>10</sup> For an example of a wife who argued that her husband first drove her mother away from their house by his insulting behaviour, and then refused to allow either her sister or aunt to attend her in the final month of her pregnancy, she 'being totally ignorant how to manage herself when she was with child', see DEL 1/598, part 1 (1768), fos. 430, 432–3; Macfarlane, *Family Life*, pp. 114, 116–17; Houlbrooke, *English Family*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> *The Autobiography of Henry Newcome*, ed. R. Parkinson (Chetham Society, 1852), ii. 248.

<sup>12</sup> Ben-Amos, 'Reciprocal Bonding', passim; A. Eyre, *A Dyurnall, or Catalogue of all my Accions and Expences from the 1st of January 1646(7)*, ed. H. J. Morehouse (Surtees Society, lxx, 1875) [hereafter Eyre, *Dyurnall*], pp. 70–1, 73, 77–8, 94, 107, 112, 116.

<sup>13</sup> W. Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622) [hereafter Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*], pp. 473–5; J. Kirkwood, *A New Family Book; Or, The True Interest of Families* (1693), pp. 31–6; W. Fleetwood, *The Relative Duties of Parents and Children, Husbands and Wives, Masters and Servants* (1705) [hereafter Fleetwood, *Relative Duties*], pp. 62–7.

and subordination could no longer be guaranteed. For even writers of advice literature believed that children could legitimately take action against their parents to prevent them remarrying if the marriage would harm their inheritance. If remarriages went ahead, but later broke down, parents could find themselves in the unenviable position of begging shelter and support from their grown children, who could also be requested to testify against their step-parents in the marriage separation cases that followed. Upon the remarriage of a parent, the tables could be turned full circle, with the possibility of a child becoming an active and critical commentator of his parent's new union.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that the nature of the parent-child relationship was one that was constantly changing. Marriage was just one point in the life cycle which could mark a shift in parent-child relations, but this did not signal the end of shared experience. The birth of grandchildren and the onset of old age were other stages in the life cycle when the roles and patterns of family life could be renegotiated. Newly married couples may have set up separate households and started their own families, but they were rarely isolated from their families of origin. If and when marital crises occurred there could be an expectation that the parents of a couple would play a part in resolving differences. Parents could even find themselves implicated as a cause of their children's marital strife. An examination of material relating to marriage breakdown from the courts of the London consistory, the Peculiars of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Arches, the High Court of Delegates, and the King's Bench between the period 1660 and 1800, is valuable in revealing how and when parents of the middling and upper sorts became involved in their children's marriages.

## I

Studies of early modern courtship have emphasized that for most couples parental approval of their choice of marriage partner was sought and desired, even if it was not a formal prerequisite to marriage formation.<sup>15</sup> But the degree of parental involvement in initial marriage negotiations could act as a predictor of the extent to which parents would play a part in the subsequent marriage relationship. Matthew Pindar claimed that the parents of his wife, Mary, had planned and arranged their marriage so that their daughter would benefit from the fortune he had inherited

<sup>14</sup> P. Thane, 'Old People and their Families in the English Past', *Charity, Self-interest and Welfare in the English Past*, ed. M. Daunton (1996) [hereafter Thane, 'Old People'], pp. 113–38; Fleetwood, *Relative Duties*, pp. 71–5; E. Foyster, 'Marrying the Experienced Widow in Early Modern England: The Male Perspective', *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. S. Cavallo and L. Warner (1999), p. 119; E. Foyster, 'Silent Witnesses? Children and the Breakdown of Domestic and Social Order in Early Modern England', *Childhood in Question: Children, Parents and the State*, ed. A. Fletcher and S. Hussey (Manchester, 1999), pp. 64–6.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, D. O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester, 2000), ch. 1, pp. 215, 221–6.

from his father. Mary's father, George Healy, had acted as Matthew's guardian and the executor of his father's will, persuading Matthew to give up his apprenticeship and inviting him to live at his home in Lincolnshire. Mary's parents often pressed Matthew to marry their daughter, her mother even bringing Mary to lie with him in his bed. They married in October 1708 when Mary was just fifteen years old. But Matthew started mistreating Mary within a year of the marriage, and after ten years of his cruelty she launched a case for marriage separation against her husband in the Lincoln consistory court. Testimony from this court case makes it clear that, having played so vital a role in the negotiation of their daughter's marriage, Mary's parents had continued to be involved in the relationship. Mary had frequently fled to her parents' house after violent quarrels, or when her husband had turned her out of the house. On one such occasion Matthew followed his wife to the house of his parents-in-law, and asked to speak to her. Standing in the porch, he started to strike her. Her cries brought forth her father, who asked Matthew 'if he was not ashamed to use his wife in that manner'? Matthew believed it was solely as the result of 'the contrivance and advice' of her parents that his wife left him and launched the marriage separation suit against him.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps Mary Pindar's parents felt that they should share some of the responsibility for the failure of their daughter's marriage when they had been so instrumental in its arrangement. Certainly, when parents had not been involved in the choice of marriage partners children might expect to bear the burden of marital misfortune on their own. Anne Marie Brogden told the London consistory court in 1758 that she had remained with her husband for nearly four years of marriage despite his blows and cruel usage. She said that this was partly because she had married against the advice of her mother and relations, 'and having greatly disobliged them was loath to complain to them'.<sup>17</sup>

For other parents, interference and disagreement over their children's choice of partner did not cease upon marriage. A husband's parents could threaten to disinherit him. Isaac Archer (1641–1700) was at pains to establish in his diary that his father had disinherited him because of religious differences, and not, as some thought, because of disapproval over his choice of wife.<sup>18</sup> But disinheritance was probably the final, and most drastic, option taken by parents. Others found ways to cause discord and the break-up of their children's marriages. Several witnesses to the marital relationship of Captain Charles Skelton and his wife Dorothy in London during 1673 believed that his mother had manufactured stories

<sup>16</sup> DEL 1/368 (1721), fos. 58v–70r, 78v–84r, 145r.

<sup>17</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, London Consistory Court Papers [hereafter LMA] DL/C/173 (1758), fos. 295r–296r, 301r.

<sup>18</sup> *Two East Anglian Diaries 1641–1729: Issac Archer and William Coe*, ed. M. Storey (Suffolk Records Society, xxxvi, 1994), p. 153.

of Dorothy's adultery, while Charles had been away at sea, because she had been against the match. It was reported that Lady Skelton had told others that her son had married a woman of 'no fortune', with a poor sexual reputation, and that unless he left his adulterous wife 'she would never own him for her son'. Apparently the motive for Lady Skelton's involvement in her son's marriage was the preservation of the family name. Charles told the court of Arches, during the marriage separation suit which he eventually brought against his wife, that his mother had told him of the rumours surrounding his wife's extra-marital liaisons, and had led him to interrogate a man believed to be her lover. He believed his mother had done this 'being sensible of the great dishonour done to her family and the particular abuse, and disreputation', which Dorothy had brought to Charles by making him a public cuckold.<sup>19</sup>

A wife's parents had an important source of power over their son-in-law since, following marriage, a couple remained dependent upon them for the payment of a wife's portion. In theory, as property was transferred from parent to husband, so too was authority. But evidence suggests that this exchange of property and power was not automatic, but could be the subject of delay, negotiation and contest between the wife's family and her new husband. In the 1690s when Elizabeth Rouse's father discovered that she had married Sampson Bound in his absence, and without his approval, he was initially very angry. But in time Rouse grew accustomed to the match and gave the couple several valuable pieces of furniture and jewellery. Nevertheless, he held back from paying his daughter's portion in full. When the marriage fell apart a few years later, and it was alleged that Elizabeth's husband had venereal disease, Rouse was able to remind his son-in-law of the gifts he had made, and told him 'that if he had behaved himself to his daughter as he ought to have done he would have made it up a considerable fortune to the said Sampson'. It was only by behaving in ways that won the approval of his father-in-law that Sampson could have earned his wife's portion. Until that time, he was under the scrutiny and censure of his wife's family.<sup>20</sup>

In the case of a father's death before his daughter's marriage, the establishment of a woman's separate estate and the payment of the marriage portion became the sole responsibility of the wife's mother, and could give her the potential for considerable influence in her daughter's marriage. Amy Erickson has argued that since, in the early modern period, 'at least half of all young women had lost their fathers by the time they married', it was frequently mothers who negotiated the financial arrangements of their daughters' marriages.<sup>21</sup> Jokes about the mother-

<sup>19</sup> CA, Case 8350 (1673), Ee4, fos. 288v, 303r; Eee5, fos. 64v–66v, 300v, 310v. For more on the popular beliefs concerning the damage that an adulterous wife did to her husband's reputation, see E. A. Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (1999), ch. 4.

<sup>20</sup> CA, Case 1055 (1693), Eee7, fos. 689v–691.

<sup>21</sup> A. Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (1993), pp. 93, 96.

in-law from hell may have a long history, but cases of marriage breakdown suggest that in this period it was the widowed mother-in-law who was seen as causing the most disruption to the stability of marriage. It was when husbands felt that widows were withholding their daughters' inheritances, or were in danger of jeopardizing its value by remarrying, that disorder in family life followed. Mary Broughton, the daughter of a merchant, married Henry Strudwick, who had a career in the army, in 1717 when she was just fourteen years old. Her widowed mother gave Henry £1,000 to purchase a lieutenant's commission in the Guards, but, according to Henry, also sought ways to secure her daughter's fortune from him. He responded by launching a suit against his mother-in-law in the court of Chancery. When his wife sought marriage separation from him on the grounds of adultery and cruelty, Henry blamed his mother-in-law for the breakdown in his marriage. According to Henry, the delay in the payment of her fortune meant that Mary's mother continued to hold power over her and prevented him from assuming complete authority as a husband. This was recognized and expressed most forcefully by Henry when he argued that, ever since the marriage, Mary's mother had 'treated her like a young child and did and now does keep her under the greatest awe and fear'. His wife's continued child-like status even rendered her vulnerable to physical correction from her mother, who, according to Henry, beat and abused her. The implication was that a young woman was subject to whoever held her purse strings, and that remained her parents until the transfer of property was completed.

Husbands like Henry Strudwick, however, were able to be critical of the authority of their widowed mothers-in-law in a way that was not possible if faced with a troublesome or interfering father-in-law. The popular stereotypes and mythology held about widows in this period gave Henry in his court narratives the means to construct his mother-in-law as a woman driven by selfish greed, who held on to her husband's inheritance to the detriment of her child's happiness. He told the High Court of Delegates that Mary's mother 'did never use him with the love and esteem due from a mother to a son tho' he . . . always behaved himself towards her with the utmost duty respect and genteel behaviour.' The continued close relationship between mother and daughter was portrayed as highly disruptive to the marital relationship. Mary would return from her frequent visits to her mother either drunk, or dissatisfied 'with her maintenance tho' [Henry] . . . allowed her clothes and all things else suitable to a woman of her birth, fortune and condition'. According to Henry, Mary's mother used all means possible 'to alienate his said wife's affections from him', and was instrumental in persuading his wife to leave him. In the all-male environment of the courtroom, the widowed mother-in-law ran the risk of becoming the scapegoat for failed marriages, and her son-in-law the recipient of shared male sympathy. A daughter's fortune could be wielded as a tool of political power by both mothers and fathers in their children's marriages. But in a period when the ownership of property was widely regarded as a married man's prerogative, the

widow was unlikely to hold undisputed authority over her daughter's fortune for any length of time.<sup>22</sup>

The widow could also be blamed for the breakdown of marriage if she became a resident in the home of one of her married children. The puritan conduct book writer, William Gouge, had advised against co-residence because of the temptation of the parent to 'so pry into everything that their children's husband or wife doth, and show such suspicion and jealousy in everything, as they cannot but cause much discord.' The Quaker merchant and bachelor William Stout (1665–1752) provided accommodation for his elderly widowed mother after she fell out with his brother's wife, with whom she had lived. Statements given to the church courts could certainly portray the presence of a parent as a source of aggravation in unhappy marriages. Elizabeth Wyatt, for example, argued in 1710 that, after the mother of her husband's former wife moved into their home, her husband treated her with greater cruelty. But Elizabeth's husband said that the residence of his former mother-in-law was unavoidable since 'she has a right to some rooms in his house and has a jointure issuing out of that estate'.<sup>23</sup> Other wives believed that their husbands invited their widowed mothers to live with them as a deliberate attempt to undermine their wives' status as mistresses over the household. Eleanor Naylor of Hanover Square in London told the court of Arches that she had been forced to leave her husband when he 'brought home his Mother whom he placed over [her] . . . and told her she was no longer Mistress of his house'.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, especially in the initial stages of a marriage, co-residence could be the result of married children living in their parents' households, rather than vice versa. For women who were faced with violent husbands, such co-residence could present significant advantages, as parents could act as crucial witnesses. Parents found a variety of ways of showing their opinion of the conduct of their children's marriages. Some parents tried to intervene and prevent relationships from deteriorating. But, at times, their involvement could be less than subtle, and could even make matters worse. Jane Prescott lived with her husband in her father's house for the first five weeks of their marriage in 1779. Her husband started beating her after only six days of marriage. Becoming suspicious of how his daughter was being treated, Jane's father, who was a clergyman, talked one evening at dinner of 'the deserts of a man who used his wife ill'. Such preaching led Isaac Prescott to 'vent his resentment' upon Jane later that evening, beating her with his fists and

<sup>22</sup> DEL 1/361 (1722), fos. 44v–46r, 81r–84r, 226r–228r, 232–3; for a similar case, see also CA, Case 2693 (1692), Ee7, fos. 139r–140v; Eee7, fos. 564v, 569v, 571r; C. Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale: Male Myths and Female Reality in 16th and 17th Century England', *Albion*, x (1978), 118–29.

<sup>23</sup> Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, p. 582; Thane, 'Old People', p. 127; K. Thomas, 'Age and Authority in Early Modern England', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, lxii (1976), 238–9; DEL 1/344 (1710), fos. 88v, 107v.

<sup>24</sup> CA, Case 6548 (1777), D1471, fo. 186v.

'swearing that if she cried out loud enough to be heard he would use her ten times worse.'<sup>25</sup>

When Ann Palmer Rea contracted venereal disease from her husband within days of her marriage in 1798, she told her mother who was staying with the couple. Her mother asked her son-in-law to seek immediate medical assistance, but Thomas Rea continued to treat his wife cruelly, and began to abuse her verbally and physically. Although Ann had told her mother about the illness, shown her the bruises after her husband had beaten her, and promised to write when her mother returned to the family home in Birmingham, she was anxious that her father should be kept ignorant of the state of her marital relationship. Ann feared, she explained, that if her father should learn of her husband's cruel treatment he would 'resent the same and might thereby bring additional ill treatment' upon her. It seems that Ann believed that her father's knowledge of her mistreatment would affect and offend him in particular ways which could only result in further violence.<sup>26</sup> That fathers might attempt to defend their daughters from assault, even if it put themselves in physical danger, was shown by the actions of Anne Strengthfield's father in August 1707. His son-in-law, Thomas, and daughter Anne had lived in his house since their marriage. Anne's father provided them with maintenance since he could not afford to give his daughter a portion, while Thomas, as a young attorney, began to establish a network of clients. When Thomas in the presence of his father-in-law began threatening Anne, and drew his sword, her father attempted to 'pacify' him. Thomas responded by turning on his father-in-law, beating him and giving him several blows to the head.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear that the parents of women who were married to violent men could act as important sources of support and refuge. Often it was the parents' home that was first sought as a place of safety. When Ann Palmer Rea could bear her husband's cruelty no longer, she returned to the home of her father and mother in Birmingham. Her father, Robert Wheeler, who was a gunmaker, told the court of King's Bench that he believed Ann had been 'compelled' to leave her husband, and that 'the house of her parent is the natural and most proper place for the said Ann Palmer Rea to resort to for safety and protection.'<sup>28</sup> Fathers such as Robert Wheeler

<sup>25</sup> LMA, DL/C/179 (1783), fos. 405v–410v.

<sup>26</sup> Public Record Office, King's Bench [hereafter KB] 1/30, part 3, East 39, Geo III, no.1 (8), Affdt of Ann Palmer Rea (6 April 1799).

<sup>27</sup> Lambeth Palace Library, Cause Papers of the Archbishops Peculiars of Croydon, Shoreham and the Arches [hereafter VH], 80/13/1 and 8 (1708). For other evidence of temporary co-residence between married children and their parents, see Chaytor, 'Household and Kinship', 37, 45, and Houlbrooke, *English Family*, p. 52. For further examples of parental intervention following violent incidents in their daughters' marriages, see M. Hunt, 'Wife Beating, Domesticity and Women's Independence in Eighteenth-century London', *Gender and History*, iv (1992) [hereafter Hunt, 'Wife Beating'], 22.

<sup>28</sup> KB 1/30, part 3, East 39, Geo III, no.1 (8), Affdt of Robert Wheeler (9 April 1799). In early modern Venice parents acted in similar ways to protect women who were the victims of violent marriages; see J. M. Ferraro, 'The Power to Decide: Battered Wives in Early Modern Venice', *Renaissance Quarterly*, xlviii (1995), 502–4, 505, 507, 509.

believed that they had the right to the custody of their daughters if the behaviour of their sons-in-law became what they regarded as intolerable. They were prepared to defend this right by swearing affidavits to the King's Bench, in response to writs of habeas corpus, which husbands could issue as attempts to argue that their wives were being illegally detained from them.<sup>29</sup> They also refused husbands entrance to their homes and access to their daughters, even if this put themselves and their families in physical danger. There are numerous stories in the court records of husbands, sometimes accompanied by armed gangs, who tried to seize their wives from their parents' homes. But parents could be defiant and apparently fearless. The parents of Isabella Sinclair gave her refuge from her violent husband in their house in Stroud, Kent in 1791. When her husband, Alexander George, came to their house to try to regain his wife and child, her parents beat him and showed their anger at his behaviour by enacting a rough form of popular justice. According to Alexander, they subjected him to a ducking in the River Medway, plunging and immersing him in the water until he nearly drowned.<sup>30</sup>

Parents were frequently close observers of their children's marriages and pursued a variety of courses of action to demonstrate their disapproval if marital behaviour did not meet their expectations. They could delay the payment of a portion or a daughter's inheritance, but the ultimate sanction was to reclaim their rights of custody as parents. Husbands knew that parental support could undermine their authority, and some made attempts to isolate their wives from that support with threats to send their wives 'away to the country', or even confine them in private madhouses.<sup>31</sup> Underlying such desperate threats was the recognition that parental control was not permanently relinquished upon the marriage of a daughter, but could be resumed if a husband failed to fulfil his marital duties in a manner which was judged by parents as 'reasonable'. There could be no clearer indication than from the cases of disputed custody that the requests for writs of habeas corpus provoked, that parenthood, with all its incumbent duties of protection and nurture, did not cease upon the marriage of children.

## II

Upon their return to the parental home, daughters could become dependent upon their parents' judgement as to whether the breakdown of their marriage should amount to marriage separation, and upon their material support in the period leading up to, and sometimes during, the legal hearings that followed. Having often played a role in marriage formation, parents could also play an important part in the dissolution of their

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, KB 1/6, part 1, Mich 12, Geo II, no.1, Affdt of Solomon Daine (25 Nov. 1738).

<sup>30</sup> KB 1/27, part 2, Mich 32, Geo III, no.1 (12), Affdt of Alexander George Sinclair (7 Nov. 1791).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, DEL 1/361 (1722), fo. 50; CA, Case 2771 (1732), D601, fo. 30; and LMA DL/C/187 (1803), fo. 38v; Hunt, 'Wife Beating', 24.

children's marriages. When entry into marriage could be a collective decision made by the couple and their family and friends, so too could exit from marriage. Mothers and fathers could act as witnesses for their children in the courts, and others who testified said that they had come to court at the request of parents, suggesting that parents could play a role in managing their children's separation suits once they had been initiated.<sup>32</sup> For the middling and upper sorts, notions of familial honour or reputation played a key part in determining why cases of marriage breakdown reached the courts, and were central in shaping the courtroom narratives of both husbands and wives. Just as couples who made a 'good' match could enhance the social status and prestige of their families, so also marriage break-up could have damaging repercussions beyond the conjugal unit.

Moreover, the shame of marital discord could reflect upon parents as well as the couple involved. Laura Gowing has skilfully reconstructed the narratives relating to the marriage separation case between Bayly and Grace Ball at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Of all those she feared finding out about her adultery, Grace dreaded her mother's reaction most when she confessed her crime to her husband's brother. Grace's concern was not misplaced for when her mother did hear of her daughter's confession, she was so affected that she wished her daughter was dead.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Lady Skelton wished that her son would separate from his adulterous wife to prevent further damage to the reputation of her family. A speedy separation from an adulterous wife was especially desirable if the legitimate inheritance of family property was not to be questioned. When faced with marital discord, as the guardians of family honour, it could be up to parents, or other senior members of a family, to decide for a couple which option, either reconciliation and a return to cohabitation, or marriage separation, would do the least damage to the family name. William Rouse, uncle to Elizabeth Bound, and an apothecary by trade, told the court of Arches in 1693 that he thought that the court should encourage Elizabeth and her husband 'to live quietly'. He believed that this would be for the 'peace of their own minds', but also would prevent 'the disreputation to their family, which otherwise would necessarily follow'.<sup>34</sup>

Within marriage, both husbands and wives were sensitive to insults upon the reputation of their parents. Robert Bendish, a merchant from

<sup>32</sup> For examples of parents acting as witnesses in their children's marriage separation cases, see CA, Case 9909 (1668), Eee3, fos. 676–7; CA, Case 9870 (1669), Eee3, fos. 547–8; VH 80/13/9 (1708); for an example of a case in which several witnesses said that they had come to court at the request of the parents of one of the parties, see DEL 1/361 (1722), fos. 111r, 174v, 678r, 682v, 692r.

<sup>33</sup> L. Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 246–51.

<sup>34</sup> CA, Case 1055 (1693), Eee7, fo. 662; for similar concern about how marital relations reflected on family honour in early modern Piedmont, see S. Cavallo and S. Cerutti, 'Female Honour and the Social Control of Reproduction in Piedmont between 1600 and 1800', *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, ed. E. Muir and G. Ruggiero (Baltimore, 1990), p. 82.

the City of London, was typical of husbands accused of marital cruelty who defended their behaviour by arguing that insults upon their families had acted as provocation to violence. He argued in 1673 that when his wife called 'his sisters whores and said that his family was a base, mean and beggarly family', he was 'highly provoked', but retained his self-control by only giving his wife 'a box on the ear or the like', never intending 'to do her any hurt'.<sup>35</sup> It is a measure of the extent to which early modern society held notions of familial honour in esteem that some wives also detailed occasions when husbands had insulted their family name as evidence which helped to place their stories of marital cruelty into the wider context of an abusive relationship. Jane Prescott, the daughter of the 'respectable clergyman', whose intervention in her marriage was described above, told the London consistory court that her husband frequently abused her father's good name, and on one occasion beat her because 'she would not obey him in call[ing] her father and mother the most shocking names'. By requiring his wife to insult and question the reputation of her elders, who were also respected figures of community standing, it is probable that Isaac Prescott's behaviour was regarded by the courts as threatening to the wider social order, as well as to marital stability.<sup>36</sup>

In a period when there was no agreed legal definition of what constituted marital cruelty, some women relied upon stories of their childhood to demonstrate that they had not been deserving of their husband's cruelty. Evidence of the social status and reputation of parents was given to show how they determined the nature of a woman's upbringing, and was contrasted with a woman's treatment since marriage. A clause in Catherine Ettrick's libel of 1768, for example, stated that 'notwithstanding the said Catherine Ettrick was of a very genteel family and had received a good education and had brought him a fortune of £2,000 and upwards yet the said William Ettrick [her husband] used her as a servant'.<sup>37</sup>

Martha Pearse argued in 1748 that her social conditioning and upbringing as the daughter of an MP and a member of the upper middling ranks had made her especially sensitive to her husband's insulting behaviour. She had often lost her senses and fainted, and his cruelty had resulted in 'the total destruction of her peace of mind'. Martha had, she said, 'from her cradle to her intermarriage with him [been] most affectionately indulged and caressed by her parents who were passionately fond of her', and as a result she was 'the less able to support herself under so

<sup>35</sup> CA, Case 757 (1673), Ee4, fo. 59v; for another example of a husband who claimed to be similarly provoked, see LMA DL/C/172 (1752), fo. 214r; for other examples of husbands who argued that they exercised self-control in their use of violence against their wives, see E. Foyster, 'Male Honour, Social Control and Wife Beating in Late Stuart England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, sixth series, vi (1996), 223.

<sup>36</sup> LMA DL/C/179 (1783), fos. 409v, 417v.

<sup>37</sup> DEL 1/598 Ettrick (1768), fos. 465-8.

severe and sharp a trial and affliction'.<sup>38</sup> The use of such an argument demonstrates not only that contemporaries believed that childhood was an influential period of life which could shape subsequent adult sensibilities, but also that a woman could reasonably expect her husband to replicate the quality and standard of living which her parents had set during her childhood. Recounting memories of parental care was one way in which adult women could seek to define the boundaries of acceptable marital behaviour. Furthermore, such memories could be invoked with powerful effect, even if both parents were already deceased.

### III

For some parents the cost of a child's marriage breakdown amounted to more than a loss of reputation or a material burden. Given the amount of historical work that has shown the affection which most parents held for their children, and the degree to which parents were often involved in their children's final marriage negotiations, if not the initial selection of suitable partners, it is not surprising to find that for some parents knowledge of unhappiness in their children's marriages caused emotional distress. According to Solomon Daine, a Kent yeoman, the return of his only child, Hannah, to his home following the break-up of her marriage signalled the onset of tragedy for his family. His attempt to persuade Hannah to return to her husband triggered tears and a declaration that 'she would not go with her said husband but would lie under a hedge or anywhere rather than with her said husband for that she went in fear of her life from him.' She subsequently became sick from venereal disease transmitted by her husband and was confined to her room. Worse still, according to Solomon, his wife, Hannah's mother, 'was gone distracted out of her senses with the thoughts of it and was forced to be tied in her bed, and that this Deponent [Solomon] was afraid that (this Deponent being under so great a concern) it would have the same effect on him.' Solomon believed that 'the great grief and concern at the illness and bodily hurt' which Hannah 'complained she had received from her Husband . . . was the sole and only cause' of his wife 'going mad'.<sup>39</sup>

Parents in the early modern period could affect, and be affected by, the quality of their children's marriages. Parenting could involve interaction with married children in the mundane or ordinary aspects of their lives, as well as during critical life events or at crisis points. However, as Michael Anderson recognized in his work on nineteenth-century family and kin relations in Lancashire, it remains difficult to measure the relative importance of parent-child ties since we cannot know if, and when, married couples gave preference to parental support over other family

<sup>38</sup> CA, Case 7022 (1748), D1573, fos. 40r, 43r, 57r; no witness statements survive for this case so we do not know whether her parents also testified for her.

<sup>39</sup> KB 1/6, part 1, Mich 12, Geo II, no.1, Affdt of Solomon Daine (25 Nov. 1738).

or non-family connections.<sup>40</sup> Even when parents were in frequent contact with their married children, they may not always have become involved in marital crises. Eyre's diary, for example, shows that his marriage was far from being free of quarrels and discontent, yet there is nothing to suggest that his father-in-law, whom he saw regularly, was even aware of these problems.<sup>41</sup> It seems likely that married couples were able to maintain a level of privacy about their relationships, and that many parents may have waited until they were asked for assistance, or until marital discord had reached a point at which it had become notorious, before they became involved. An intriguing area of family life in the past, which is likely to remain hidden from view, is the nature of the parent–child relationship after the courts had given formal sanction to marriage separation. The court records do not reveal whether parents were prepared to continue to support and maintain their children financially after marriage separation, and, more importantly, provide no indication of the long-term impact of marriage breakdown upon the bonds of affection between parent and child.

The nature of the sources used for this research has meant that it has concentrated upon the lives of the upper and middling ranks in early modern society. These social groups were the focus of study when family history first began to be written by academics such as Lawrence Stone. The story of the early modern family was portrayed as one of concern for lineage and kin giving way to the 'closed, nuclear family', and of rising levels of affection or sentiment in parent–child relations.<sup>42</sup> But by looking at the period from the Restoration until the end of the eighteenth century, this study has shown that the nuclear family was rarely isolated from kin, and that often what lay behind parents' relationships with their married children were financial or property considerations, and a concern for family honour, in particular claims for legitimate lineage. However, it is also clear that such motives did not operate to exclude those driven by affection. Parents continued to be emotionally committed to their married children, and the support sought from them in times of crisis was often of an emotional kind. Relationships between married couples and their closest kin could be both calculating and affectionate.

<sup>40</sup> Anderson, *Family Structure*, p. 62.

<sup>41</sup> For examples of Eyre's disagreements with his wife, see Eyre, *Dyurnall*, pp. 43, 46, 51, 53, 54, 65, 75, 80, 84.

<sup>42</sup> L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (1977).