Temporary virginity and the everyday body: *Le Bone Florence of Rome* and bourgeois self-making

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I

The earliest surviving representation of an English bourgeois family at prayer appears in a fifteenth-century book of hours, now known as the Bolton Hours, made for members of a York mercantile family.¹ The picture – one of a sequence of full-page illustrations – depicts a Crucifix-Trinity with four figures kneeling in front of it: a father and mother in the centre, flanked by a son and a daughter on the left and right. They all have scrolls issuing from their mouths, on which are written two Latin couplets.² The first couplet is spoken by the boy and the man, who share a rhyme. The boy says: ‘O father, o son, you who are called the kind spirit’ (O pater o nate tu spiritus alme vocate), and the father says: ‘Grant what we seek from you through your compassion’ (Quod petimus a te concede tua pietate). The second couplet, which completes the prayer, is spoken by the woman and the girl. The mother says: ‘Heavenly majesty, threefold god, one power’ (Celica magestas trinus deus una potestas), and the girl says: ‘You who dispense gifts, make us chaste and honourable’ (Premia qui prestas nos castas fac et honestas). Her ‘us’ cannot refer to them all, though: the feminine plural endings of the Latin adjectives ‘castas’ (chaste) and ‘honestas’ (honourable) in the last line make it clear that it is the chastity and honour of the two women only, and not of the men, which is being prayed for by the family as a whole. What is at stake in ‘castas’ and ‘honestas’ is not only, or even primarily, a set of religious values, despite the religious context, but a social ethic. ‘Chaste’ and ‘honourable’ are part of a public discourse of female respectability in the fifteenth century. The family is represented as united around this issue: the sexual conduct and good name of its female members. And in this

strongly ideological representation, it is the daughter who is made to speak these words: her aspirations are represented as not only hers but also her family's and those of her social group. The hope is, perhaps, that she will grow up to be like the 'honesta mulier' ('honourable woman'), Mary Brathwayt, widow of a former mayor of York, who 'out of her pure desire and devotion' had a cross built in the market place in York in 1421 in memory of her husband and all Christian souls, and who was probably known to the book's original owners.³

The family's whole prayer, cast as it is in that form of the future that imperatives bring into being – the future in which wishes, desires and fantasies are played out – opens up a space for narrative. 'Make us chaste and honourable' invites the reader/viewer to imagine a set of events in which the virtues of chastity and honour are brought into being (made), in which they are not states but forms of behaviour, not ways of being but ways of doing. Such an imagined set of events is not a scenario, like the picture I have been describing, but a story.

So we might link this bourgeois prayer with bourgeois narrative and this is, indeed, what I propose to do. There are many stories that survive from late-medieval urban milieux, including many romances. They are in well-known manuscripts, such as the Auchinleck manuscript, compiled in London in the 1330s,⁴ or – a hundred and fifty years later – in less familiar books such as Cambridge University Library, MS Ff. 2. 38, written by a Leicestershire scribe, probably in the 1480s.⁵ The latter is relevant here: commissioned perhaps a couple of generations later than the Bolton Hours, it is a paper manuscript containing nine romances alongside other kinds of stories – saints' lives and moral tales – as well as a courtesy text and rhymes on the essential articles of the faith. Like the Bolton Hours, it is provincial, and this is an important aspect of how both books have been regarded. The Bolton Hours is expensively illustrated, with forty-seven full-page illuminations. Nevertheless, the quality of the work, compared with books made in London for aristocratic patrons, has led art historians to treat it somewhat condescendingly. Likewise, CUL Ff. 2. 38, which emanates from a similar provincial milieu, has been described rather patronisingly as 'ideally suited to the instruction, edification and entertainment of well-doing, devout readers of modest intellectual accomplishments'.⁶ We might compare the tone of this observation with that of comments made about a book that was apparently assembled to order in the 1440s, and which includes a range of courtly poems, especially love complaints and dream visions by Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Tanner 346, we are told, 'forms an

anthology of poetry that “reflects the social and literary refinements of the ‘lettered chivalry’ of the time”.⁷ ‘Modest intellectual accomplishments’ and ‘social and literary refinements’: it is clear which is the approved group. But, of course, bourgeois romances in general have been treated patronisingly: they are the products, an influential critic has claimed, of ‘a lower-middle-class audience, a class of social aspirants who wish to be entertained with what they consider to be the same fare, but in English, as their social betters’.⁸ The implication is that the readers and commissioners of these works are people who aspire to the elite art-objects of their social superiors, but who lack the taste, cultivation or contacts to acquire the genuine article. There also seems to be an implication that the critic has a better eye for these things than they have.

This links, of course, to a larger debate over ‘popular’ culture, and to the extent to which the categories ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ (and the hierarchy of taste they assume) are themselves produced by the criticism that claims to be only describing them. It may be, however, that it is not only modern academic judgements that are at issue here, because the kinds of implicit distinctions and hierarchies being drawn in the twentieth century surely mirror practices from the fifteenth. The scribe of CUL Ff. 2. 38 was of Leicestershire origin and may have worked in Leicester itself.⁹ The most obvious assumption is that the manuscript was commissioned for urban domestic use from a local professional. It was originally two unbound booklets, and presumably it has only survived at all because of the lucky decision of a later owner to bind the paper booklets together in leather. The book contains *The Adulterous Falmouth Squire*, *How a Merchande did his Wife Betray* and *A Gode Mater of the Merchand and his Sone*,¹⁰ in a sequence starting about a third of the way into the first booklet. These are followed immediately by *The Erl of Tolous*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, *Sir Tryamour*, the northern *Octavian*, *Bevis of Hamtoun*, and the tale-collection, *The Seven Sages of Rome*, with which the first booklet ends. The second booklet follows on with four more romances: the so-called ‘fifteenth-century’ *Guy of Warwick*, *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, *Robert of Cisyle* and *Sir Degare*. If we dispense with our anyway tenuous modern generic boundaries, we have a long sequence of stories, starting with *The Adulterous Falmouth Squire* and ending with *Sir Degare*, most of which have to do with the closest ties of kinship: between husbands and wives, and between parents and children. The compilation, then, emphasises the idea of the nuclear family that is also discernible in the picture of the family at prayer in the Bolton Hours.

All these anonymous poems in CUL Ff. 2. 38 are, moreover, in tail-rhyme or four-stress couplets; there is nothing by Chaucer, Gower or Lydgate, and nothing written in the Chaucerian stanza forms – rime royal and five-stress couplets – that writers in the fifteenth-century courtly tradition adopted. Chaucer had made it clear in the 1390s that, as far as he was concerned, tail-rhyme was the medium of choice of the unrefined; his mockery of the stanza in ‘The Tale of Sir Thopas’ was a way of coding his own formal innovations, by contrast, as socially prestigious. His fifteenth-century followers understood this and many of them adopted Chaucerian modes. We find rime royal used by Osbern Bokenham and John Capgrave for saints’ lives; by John Hardyng for a chronicle; by John Metham for a romance, and of course by all sorts of people for lyrics. Nevertheless, we cannot assume that the absence of Chaucer or his followers from CUL Ff. 2. 38 shows that the Chaucerian tradition had not spread to Leicestershire by the fourth quarter of the fifteenth century. It seems unlikely that by then people in the business of acquiring texts did not know about rime royal and what it meant, and did not know about Chaucer and what he meant. CUL Ff. 2. 38 is the product of a nationwide traffic in texts that was drawn on by different and overlapping readerships. Chaucer’s poems were already part of this traffic by the mid fifteenth century. Contemporary with CUL Ff. 2. 38 is the Findern manuscript (Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff. 1. 6) compiled by members and associates of a gentry household in Derbyshire, including women, who must also have had access to the traffic in texts. The Findern manuscript contains poems by Gower, Lydgate and Chaucer, and many of its lyrics are in rime royal. The most striking feature of its contents by comparison with CUL Ff. 2. 38, however, is that there is so little narrative. It contains the romance of *Sir Degrevaunt* and an episode from the Alexander story, reduced to a static love debate. Much of what it contains is lyric; it is about states of mind and not events; about feeling rather than doing. This may help us to characterise CUL Ff. 2. 38, with its large collection of stories in non-Chaucerian modes, as something other than merely a compilation for ‘well-doing, devout readers of modest intellectual accomplishments’. These are stories for people who do not care about ‘literary’ fashion, and whose tastes allow them to reject aristocratic forms as much as ape them. And so I come back to where I started: to the York book of hours, with its representation of the nuclear family and its strong sense of urban and provincial self-worth.¹¹

Let us try to imagine these two books – the Bolton Hours and CUL Ff. 2. 38 – being read, not in a manor-house in the country, as

the Findern manuscript was, but in a timber-framed urban house that was also a place of work: what Langland calls a 'burgeises place', as distinct from a 'beggars cote'.¹² We might think of a house like that owned by John Collan, a York goldsmith, who died in 1490: it had a hall, a parlour, a boulting-house (where flour was stored and sifted), a kitchen, a store-room, a great chamber, a second chamber and a workshop.¹³ It no doubt had at least one privy and was served by the network of public ditches that carried away waste and water. The bourgeois scene of reading was in a house like this: the goldsmith's, the tailor's, the grocer's; perhaps in the hall, or in the parlour, or in one of the chambers. There must have been a mixed readership of men and women, old and young, sons and daughters, as well as the para-family members who were servants and apprentices.

A house like this, though, was by the fifteenth century not only material but also ideological. By then an idea of domesticity had developed among what I am calling the bourgeoisie – that is, the families of the people who owned their own businesses, were members of the franchise and of the leading fraternities, and participated in town government.¹⁴ The bourgeois home was where trade, manufacture, business, cooking, eating, sleeping – and reading – were all understood as interrelated but separate aspects of domestic life and ordered as such.¹⁵ Managing this kind of domesticity entailed a particular conceptualisation of everyday space and time, locating the regimes of the body, which were its primary concern, inside the house and not, like the urban poor, outside it. The regimes of the body include getting the children up and putting them to bed; preparing the food and clearing it away; making a mess and tidying it up; looking after the sick, the old and the dying; the ordinary, daily repetition of life and death in all its materiality. One of the ideological tasks of bourgeois women, unlike their aristocratic counterparts, must have been the unmediated and intimate management of what I call the 'everyday body' in the home, to which I shall return later.

This home was the context, then, of reading and prayer – the kind of material found in CUL Ff. 2. 38, which simultaneously constituted and expressed urban domestic values. Of the 'family' narratives in CUL Ff. 2. 38 most, like most medieval narratives apart from saints' lives, have men as their protagonists. The exception is *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, which only survives here.¹⁶ It concerns the adventures of Florence, daughter of the emperor of Rome, between the time when she is first sought in marriage and the time at which she conceives her first child. 'Make us chaste and honourable', is the daughter's prayer in

the Bolton Hours, and the story of Florence can be read as a fantasy of that process of making.

II

Le Bone Florence of Rome is a much shortened version of an early thirteenth-century French poem, *Florence de Rome*, which circulated in England in the Anglo-Norman period: two of the three manuscripts in which it survives were copied by English scribes.¹⁷ On the face of it, this looks like an example of what I am arguing against: the idea that Middle English romances are for 'social aspirants who wish to be entertained with what they consider to be the same fare, but in English, as their social betters'. But in fact this is no more true of *Le Bone Florence of Rome* than it is of *Troilus and Criseyde*: both poems are transformed by the shift to a new language and a new social milieu.

Florence, the heroine of the romance, is, as I have said, the daughter of the emperor of Rome. She is sought in marriage by the physically repulsive, one-hundred-year-old Sir Garcy, the emperor of Constantinople, whom she refuses. Florence's father is killed in the war that this refusal provokes, and Florence, lacking male protection, marries Sir Emere, the younger son of the king of Hungary. At Florence's request, however, Emere leaves Rome before the marriage is consummated in order to avenge her father's death on Sir Garcy. Florence is then subjected to a series of horrifying experiences: her brother-in-law Miles produces what he claims is Emere's dead body and tries to marry her, but she escapes; Miles then tells Emere that Florence has been unfaithful in his absence, abducts Florence, tries to rape her and hangs her up by her hair. She is rescued by Sir Tyrry, who takes her home with him, and she has to defend herself against an attempted rape by a knight of the household. The rejected knight cuts the throat of Tyrry's daughter, who shares Florence's bed, and leaves the bloody knife in Florence's hand. Cast out into the forest, she rescues a criminal from hanging and he becomes her servant. He conspires with a friend of his to sell her to a sea-captain who, along with all his men, tries to gang-rape her on board ship. Florence's prayers to the Virgin Mary produce a mass detumescence among the crew and a miraculous storm; she gets to shore, enters a nunnery and becomes a noted healer. Emere and all the people who have wronged her are by this time suffering from various kinds of illness; they all come to her without knowing who she

is, rehearse their stories, and are healed. She is reunited with Emere and they finally consummate their marriage.

Le Bone Florence of Rome has been put alongside the stories of persecuted wives – Constance and Griselda – which emphasise, says Hornstein, ‘the virtue of a meek Job-like faith’.¹⁸ Nevertheless this poem is unlike those, and unlike Emare, which has another rare female protagonist, in that Florence, although technically married in the course of the narrative and therefore a persecuted wife, remains a virgin till the closing lines. In fact, it may already be clear that the poem places a particular value on the heroine’s virginity and at the same time is unusually attentive to the body. These things are, as I shall show, related.

To take virginity first: we must bear in mind that there was more than one late-medieval discourse of virginity.¹⁹ On the one hand, virginity was represented as a sacred vocation that was placed highest in the triad virginity-widowhood-marriage. This way of categorising female sexuality had been a commonplace of Christian thought since the fourth century. Religious virginity – the virginity of those who had committed themselves to lives of total sexual renunciation for the love of God – was held to be a form of perfection, ‘the hyeste degree that is in this present lif’, as Chaucer’s ‘Parson’s Tale’ has it: ‘thilke precious fruyt that the book clepeth the hundred fruyt’.²⁰ This is a reference to the parable in Matthew 13.9 of the sower whose seeds fell on the ground and bore fruit, ‘some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold’. Virginity earns the hundredfold reward, continent widowhood the sixtyfold, and chaste marriage the thirtyfold. Compared with the virginity of those who intend to remain continent for the whole of their lives, the temporary virginity of those who intend to marry does not rank at the top of this stern hierarchy; it is of an inferior order, no better than the chastely married.

There was, nevertheless, also another way of understanding virginity: as a phase in the life-course of women intending to marry, which produced the triad maid-wife-widow. Chaucer’s Knight, for example, observes that ‘A man moot nedes love, maugree his hede, ... Al be she mayde, or wydwe, or elles wyf’.²¹ Here it is clear that the ‘mayde’ is not a consecrated virgin but a young unmarried woman, and the triad in which she occurs supposedly includes all women. By contrast, the religious triad, virgin-widow-wife, is not inclusive, but omits unmarried women who are sexually active. Since this is a hierarchy of states of virtue, the latter do not count at all. In one discourse, then, virginity is a religious value, in the other it is a social one, however much it may have been buttressed by appeals to religion. Heroines of saints’ lives are

usually virgins of the first sort; whether or not their virginity is at risk, it is an attribute of their sanctity. Heroines of romances are usually the second; they are wives in waiting and their virginity is an attribute of their marriageability.²² The plots in which they figure are ones in which the goal is not a heavenly crown but a husband. The chastity of daughter and mother in the Bolton Hours illustration is of this second kind: they represent maid and wife, in the maid–wife–widow triad, not virginity and marriage in the virginity–widowhood–marriage hierarchy. Their chastity has to do with the management of fecundity in accordance with contemporary conventions of behaviour for women of their class.

Of course, these two triads blur and, of course, when young unmarried women from elite families were considered as potential wives, there was a strong sense that they ought to be virgins, which was buttressed, as I have already said, by religious values. We can see this process at work in the Bolton Hours, where the young girl is represented in a prayer book as praying for her own chastity. Nevertheless, the life-long virgin and the virgin-till-marriage were conceptually differentiated, as Florence's story shows. Much of the action consists of a concerted male alliance to put her virginity to the test, and although she spends time in a nunnery, at the end of the poem she is reunited in Rome with her husband, Emere. The reader knows that the religious life is not the goal of Florence's story – it is not about a consecrated virgin but about the other, temporary, kind. The nunnery is a detour *en route* to the wedding feast with which the poem ends.

So the story focuses on a particular phase in a woman's life: her maidenhood, defined as the point at which she becomes marriageable to the point at which she loses her virginity to her husband, quite a long time after the marriage ceremony. Florence at the beginning of the story is at least fifteen: she has been 'set to scole' (58), can read as well as being adept at harp and psaltery, and lives with her widowed father, the emperor of Rome. Nevertheless, maidenhood in this text is not coterminous with moving from her father's control to her husband's: that is, the story does not use yet another life-course triad which was available in late-medieval England: that of daughter–wife–widow.²³ The plot is shaped to allow Florence a period in which she is neither daughter, because her father is dead, nor wife, because she has not consummated her marriage. By having her tell Emere that she will not sleep with him until he has captured or killed Sir Garcy, Florence herself is made to create the narrative space in which she will occupy the ambiguous status of the virgin wife, and in which her 'mayden–

hedd' will be constantly under attack. The narrator does not describe Florence as Emere's 'wyfe' until after they have consummated their marriage at the end of the poem; in the meantime she is still called a 'maydyn'.²⁴ We might think of Florence's prolongation of her virgin state as the poem's way of decorously figuring a stage of pre-marital independence which we know existed for young women in late-medieval England, the semi-autonomous phase of service, in which the daughter has left her father's house but not yet entered her husband's and which daughter-wife-widow does not adequately map.²⁵ So what all this adds up to is the fact that the poem is interested, in a way that saints' lives are not, in virginity as a phase, as something that girls in particular are expected to grow into and out of. This is connected, as I have already suggested, with its focus on the body, and in particular with the body in time.

This latter focus is evident as soon as Florence's first suitor, Sir Garcy, is introduced at the beginning of the poem. He is a hundred years old, and possibly more:

Hys flesche trembylde for grete elde,
Hys blode colde hys body vnwelde,
Hys lypes blo forthy;
He had more mystyr of a gode fyre,
Of bryght brondys brennyng schyre,
To beyke hys boones by,
A softe bath a warme bedd,
Then any maydyn for to wedd,
And gode encheson why,
For he was bresyd and all tobrokyn,
Ferre trauelde in harnes and of warre wrokyn. (94–104)

This is in some ways a medicalised old man's body: cold and dry, as the theory of humours had it; a condition which cannot be reversed, only ameliorated by keeping warm, taking plenty of rest and avoiding sexual intercourse, as the best doctors advised.²⁶ It is the old body of the calendar illustrations that represent February as an elderly man sitting indoors by a fire. Garcy's fantasies of Florence's youthful body are the passive dreams of old age: 'Sche schall lygg be my syde, / And taste my flankys wyth hur honde' (108–9), he says. 'Taste' is a word that hovers between the medical, the erotic and the maternal: part caress, part healing touch.²⁷ He goes on to develop his strikingly unpenetrative, infantile dreams of reawakening to endless cuddles: 'Sche schall me

bope hodur and happe, / And in hur louely arnes me lappe, / Bothe euyn and mornetyde' (112–14). When she hears of all this, Florence responds by invoking the grotesque old man's body of *fabliau*:²⁸

Sche seyde, 'Be God þat boght me dere,
Me had leuyr þe warste bachylere,
In all my fadurs thede,
Then for to lye be hys bresyd boones,
When he coghyth and oldely grones ...' (244–8)

From her point of view there is nothing infantile about this disgusting old person. He does not pose a sexual threat – those are to come later – and this is, of course, precisely why he is regarded with such contempt. Caring for the elderly is one thing, but marrying them is another. Florence knows the kind of virginity she represents: its whole point is that she is going to lose it. She also knows the plot she is part of: she is to marry a young man who can make her pregnant the first time they sleep together, as Emere will do. A coughing centenarian who wants to be cuddled will not.

Nevertheless, Florence's phrase, 'bresyd boones' (247), harks back to the earlier description of Garcy's body that I have already quoted: 'For he was bresyd and all tobrokyn, / Ferre trauelde in harnes and of warre wrokyn' (103–4). 'Bresyd' allows the *fabliau* perspective to shade into something different: it can mean simply 'decrepit' or 'exhausted', and elsewhere in Middle English it collocates with 'bones' in this sense.²⁹ It can also mean 'shattered', 'damaged' or 'injured', however, and is frequently used in these senses in contexts that have to do with fighting or warfare.³⁰ Lines 103–4 contain yet another view of the old man's body, as worn out by its own hard, male, soldiering life. This perspective sees the body as having a specific history that is something other than either the enfeeblement of medical discourse or the disgusting decrepitude of *fabliau*. It is picked up later when Garcy, having declared war on Rome, meets Florence's father on the field of battle. The two old generals realise that they are going to have to fight in single combat, despite their age and the fact that, as Garcy says, he has not worn armour for seven years: 'Wyth scharpe swyrdys faght þey pen, / They had be two full doghty men, / Gode olde fyghtyng was there' (679–81). This moment is shot through with a sense of what the two old men had once been and with nostalgia for what their style momentarily conflates: the way fighting was in the old days, and the way old men fight. These two old soldiers are their pasts, and their bodies tell their histories.

This curious moment hovers, as so much of the poem does, on the borders between nightmare and farce: in the course of their single combat Garcy hits Florence's father on the helm and issues the first of the many threats of rape that Florence is to receive: 'When þat Y haue leyn hur by, / And done hur schame and vylenye, / Then wyll I of hur no mare, / But geue hur to my chaumburlyayne' (688–91). Old soldiers in late medieval culture – or at least in this product of it – do not retire, but carry on doing what young soldiers do: fighting, and raping the enemy's women. If this old soldier is his past, as I have suggested, these are what his past includes, and it is as much brutal as heroic. The poem's treatment of Garcy suggests that there is not a single fix on old age or a single way of talking about it: it is a mixture of energy and decay; of autonomy and dependence; of sexual impotence and a kind of Yeatsian desire for desire; simultaneously pathetic, contemptible, terrifying and absurd.

The poem does not only focus on the old body, however. Sick, deformed and wounded; needing to be fed, clothed, kept warm and given rest; eroticised, tormented and vulnerable; the corpse – all these varieties of the body in time are accommodated by the poem, and not as animal but as human. The representation of Florence and her experiences is strikingly corporeal. She is, we are told early on, 'þe feyrest þynge, / That euyr was seen wolde or zynge, / Made of flesche and felle' (307–9). In Middle English 'þynge' had a range of meanings, not all of them associated with materiality, and its use in line 307 seems to have been a way of signifying sympathy and tenderness.³¹ Nevertheless another sense of 'þynge' as 'living, corporeal being'³² is picked up in the next line in the brief allusion to human ageing ('wolde or zynge'), and made explicit in 'flesche and felle' in the line after. Florence's sufferings are inflicted on, endured by, and understood in terms of, the flesh as well as the will. She falls from her horse and is beaten with a sword (1425–6); wandering in a forest with her kidnapper, she 'hungurd wondur sare' (1451) and is given bread and water by a hermit – food which never tasted sweeter to her (1468–70); she is hung up by her hair from a tree and beaten on 'hur nakyd flesche' (1517); rescued, she is given a herbal bath that 'made hur sore sydes softe' and fed on rich food (1550–2); assaulted in her chamber, she picks up a stone and hits her attacker with it, so that he spits out his front teeth and his nose bleeds (1607–9); this attacker kills her bed-fellow by gripping her throat and slicing through it while they sleep (1631–2); Florence wakes up in the morning to find a knife in her hand and the young girl, 'burlyng in hur blode' (1637), beside her in

the bed; this is her third corpse: she has already seen the mutilated bodies of her father and – as far as she knows – her husband; a thief she has rescued from the gallows repays her by selling her for so much gold that ‘hyt passyd almoost hur weyght’ (1790); she is embraced so hard in the course of another attempted rape that ‘Hur rybbes crakyd as pey breke wolde’ (1850). In all this there is, it seems, no abjection: the body is not shrunk from and does not defile. It is multivalent: sometimes funny; at others appalling; at others no more than matter-of-factly there to be contended with: fed, rested, clothed. It is what the poem understands humans to be: what I call the everyday body.

III

The everyday body is the body at home; it is the product of the peculiar perspectives of close-quarters domestic living, of its intimacies and knowledge.³³ Home is the place where, as I have already said, the regimes of the body routinely take place: eating, sleeping, feeding, washing, defecating, caring for the sick, being born and dying. The ordinariness of these routines and of the home itself means that domestic perspectives on the body are for the most part unrecorded. Nevertheless, an unpretentious narrative such as *Le Bone Florence* of Rome, found in a manuscript assembled for bourgeois domestic reading and with a rare female protagonist, might be the kind of text where, if anywhere, such a perspective is to be found. We can find other kinds of evidence for the everyday body in the courtesy poems that were read in the bourgeois home, such as ‘How the goode man taght hys sone’ which is included in CUL Ff. 2. 38. Its sententious and commonplace advice includes dicta on daily routines: about praying before starting work in the morning, about getting enough rest, about not taking ‘rere-sopers’ (late-night suppers) that destroy the complexion, and so on. It is a text generated by the conditions of intimacy and offers guidance about living successfully in very close proximity with others. In other courtesy texts the everyday body is the subject of more intimate advice: about farting, scratching private parts, picking teeth, and wiping noses.

I am not arguing that the everyday body is somehow the body as it ‘really’ is – as a physical object outside history, a material ground of meaning. The body is always mediated; its ‘natural’ needs, for food, clothing, warmth and rest – needs that are primarily supplied by the home – are always also historical and social, and always seen from

somebody's point of view. To use the everyday body as a tool of analysis, we need to specify it, to locate it in particular social contexts, and on grids of gender, class and age.

High culture did, of course, know the everyday body, but invoked it in order to dismiss it. We get a particularly jaundiced view of it in, for example, the rhetorical topos of the 'molestiae nuptiarum', or woes of marriage. This theme goes back to Ambrose and Jerome in the fourth century and, beyond them, to the Greek Fathers and classical literary tradition, and regularly occurs in writings aimed at discouraging the reader from forsaking celibacy for marriage.³⁴ A striking Middle English example occurs in *Hali Meidhad*, a letter on virginity written in the West Midlands around the beginning of the thirteenth century.³⁵ This text, addressed to women, is an argument for virginity as the highest spiritual calling in the religious triad, virgin–widow–wife, which I have already discussed. In order to celebrate virginity, the author denigrates marriage in a variety of ways. There is, for example, a long passage on the bodily disfigurements and discomforts of pregnancy, which leads into the agonies of childbirth and the miseries of motherhood:

Efter al þis, kimeð of þet bearn ibore þus wanunge
þe schal abute midniht makie þe to wakien ... Ant hwet, þe cader
fulðen, ant bearmes umbe stunde, to ferkin ant to fostrin hit se
moni earm-hwile

[After all this, there comes from the child born in this way, wailing
and crying, which will keep you up in the middle of the night ...
And all the filth in the cradle, and in your lap sometimes, so many
weary hours feeding and rearing it.]³⁶

By comparison with virgins, married women have

of so heh se lahe iliht – of englene ilicnesses, of Iesu Cristes leof-
mon, of leafdi in heouene, into flesches fulðe, into beastes liflade,
into monnes þeowdom, ant into worlde's weane.

[descended so low from so high – from the likeness of angels, from
the beloved of Jesus Christ, from a lady in heaven, into carnal filth,
into the life of an animal, into servitude to a man, and into the
world's misery.]³⁷

Here the life of the mind, whether religious contemplation or philosophy, is valorised and the bodily regimes of the home are represented

as a repugnant and sub-human bondage. The trope depends on accepting a series of familiar theoretical dualisms: between soul and body, between heaven and hell, between purity and filth. Within the home, however, the everyday body was apparently understood differently, as something more like a practical unity of consciousness and materiality. It was not, to this way of thinking, the lesser part of a body–mind hierarchy.³⁸ Moreover, although much recent scholarship has argued that medieval thought habitually equated the body with women, this was not the everyday perspective.³⁹ To the home's way of thinking, men – as *Le Bone Florence of Rome* acknowledges – are embodied too.⁴⁰ The everyday body is vulnerable and needy, but it is not despised as worthless flesh; its processes may be dirty and smelly but they are not morally filthy; domestic living is not 'beastes liflade' (the life of an animal), or at least not in the contemptuous sense in which this phrase is used in *Hali Meïðhad*. As a concept, it is produced by the person who cannot afford to be squeamish but just has to get on with cleaning up the vomit on the floor. Coping, rather than recoiling, is the law of domestic life. The mixture of perspectives on old age I have identified in *Le Bone Florence of Rome* can be linked to this law: the everyday body is not a thing but a bundle of attitudes, a way of thinking about the body that makes it possible to get through the day, by turning distaste into a joke and awe into pity, or allowing all these perspectives to co-exist. The everyday body is tolerated, grumbled about, laughed at, wept over and lived with. With all this in mind, we might interpret *Hali Meïðhad*'s depiction of the wearisome tasks of motherhood as grounded in male bafflement at what women put up with, since it is on women that the burdens of the home fall most heavily. And, to return to an earlier point, the orderly domesticity of the late-medieval 'bourgeises place' required the goodwife to take direct responsibility for those burdens. *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, then, is more than a source of evidence for the everyday body in late-medieval England, which is what I suggested above; it is also a product of the ideological project of bourgeois domesticity. *Hali Meïðhad* is written from the religious perspective of the virgin–widow–wife hierarchy and presents domestic living and the management of the body in a hostile way, in order to persuade young women to eschew them. *Le Bone Florence of Rome* is written from the social perspective of the maid–wife–widow sequence and presents domestic living and management of the body as something for which young women have special gifts.

This seems to be the point of the final part of Florence's story, in which she reveals a hitherto unsuspected capacity for healing. After

escaping from a shipwreck through the protection of the Blessed Virgin, she fetches up in a nunnery where she is welcomed, given a nun's habit and lives the religious life. She becomes noted for curing the 'syke' and 'sare' (1927), and her fame spreads. Meanwhile, back in Rome, Florence's husband, Emere, has received an incurable head wound in battle, which 'was festurd wythowte delyte' (1943). Simultaneously, all those who have wronged her fall ill, and their illnesses have grotesque physical effects that are described with grim relish. Emere's brother, Mylys, who kidnapped Florence, has become a leper (a 'fowle meselle' (1965)), with 'pokkys and bleyne's bloo' (2022), so hideous that he hides himself from public view; the knight who tried to rape Florence and cut her bedfellow's throat has the palsy 'and was crompylde and crokyd perto' (1977); the captain of the ship who also tried to rape her hobbles on crutches, his eyes bulging and his limbs rotting 'Wyth woundys wanne and wete' (1992, 2027); while the thief she saved from the gallows has 'an euyl pat dud him grefe' (1994) and has to be trundled in a wheelbarrow because he 'Had no fote on to goo' (2031). This weird procession of the morally and physically deformed makes its way to Florence's nunnery, at the same time as Emere, in order to be healed. One reading of the poem's emphasis on all this corporeal bizarrerie is that it stresses the fact that Florence's enemies have been punished by God long before they receive human punishment at their final unmasking.⁴¹ This does not exclude another reading: that it stresses the physical repugnance of the task of healing. This is not a job for the squeamish, any more than is the care of infants or the elderly incontinent. The language used here is not medical; what is at issue is the nurse's practical care, not the doctor's learned diagnosis. Although they do not know her in her nun's habit, Florence recognises them all straight away, and 'lyghtly at them loghe' (2018). Her laughter may be at the irony of their new situations, and what these reveal about the fragile basis of male power, resting as it has done for so much of the action on physical strength. The rapist, the murderer, the kidnapper – violence against women takes many forms in this poem – can only get away with it for so long, because their bodies will do for them in the end. This is the unspoken knowledge of the home, which sees patriarchy at its most vulnerable and from very close up. Florence insists that before she will heal them they must make public confession, and so one by one they tell the stories of their crimes which, patched together, are Florence's own horrific history. Then, unflinchingly, 'Sche handylde pem wyth hur hande' (2110) – the black sores, the shaking limbs, the footless legs – and they are made whole.⁴²

We might, in conclusion, think about the function of this horrific history in the poem as a whole. It is a history in which the daughter proves herself chaste and honourable: after the wedding feast, the people thank God 'That þe lady was comyn agayne, / And kept hur chaste and clene' (2161–3). By the end of the poem Florence is the wife of the Emperor of Rome, as her mother had been, and is a mother herself. The only difference is that she does not die in childbirth, as her mother had done. In the orderly bourgeois household the daughter takes her mother's place and not her father's: in the Bolton Hours, mother and daughter together pray for an identical future. For the daughter to take the father's place is apparently unthinkable, even though Florence is her father's heir. When her father dies and Florence inherits all his 'brode landys' (829), his dukes, earls and barons all wring their hands and ask: 'Who schall vs now geue londys or lythe, / Hawkes, or howndys, or stedys stythe, / As he was wonte to doo?' (841–3) The expected answer is clearly not 'Florence, of course'. Florence may inherit but she cannot rule: in fact she is made to faint at this juncture as if to acquiesce in her own incapacity. And so the unequal distribution of public power between men and women perpetuates itself; the landless Emere acquires an empire, Florence sends him away and her nightmares begin. The period I have already identified in which she is neither a daughter nor a wife is the period of the horrific history that gets pieced together at the end of the poem. As bourgeois reading matter, *Le Bone Florence of Rome* is a parental fantasy, it seems, which allows the daughter a measure of freedom but teaches her that the world in which that freedom is exercised is nightmarishly hostile. It allows her to reject the unsuitable husband but obliges her in the end to take the suitable one for whom she has strenuously preserved her virginity; and of course it presents her with only one future, a future in which she will end up like her mother. Nevertheless, the representation of experience in terms of everyday corporeality also ensures that she has the measure of the world she lives in: the person who can cope with the body is the one who has the last laugh.

Notes

- 1 York, Minster Library, MS Additional 2; early fifteenth century. See Neil Ker and A. J. Piper, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries*, 4 vols (Oxford, 1969–92), vol. IV, pp. 786–91, and Kathleen Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts, 1390–1490*, 2 vols (London, 1996), vol. II, pp. 119–21. See also Patricia Cullum and Jeremy Goldberg, 'How Margaret Blackburn taught her

- daughters: reading devotional instruction in a Book of Hours', in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne *et al.* (eds), *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain* (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 217–36.
- 2 The texts are transcribed by Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts*, vol. IV, p. 790. My translation.
- 3 *York Memorandum Book Part II (1388–1493)*, ed. Maud Sellers, Surtees Society 125 (Durham and London, 1914), p. 100.
- 4 Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates' 19.2.1. See also *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, ed. Derek Pearsall and I. C. Cunningham (London, 1977). The most recent study is Ralph Hanna, 'Reconsidering the Auchinleck manuscript', in Derek Pearsall (ed.), *New Directions in Later Medieval Manuscript Studies* (Woodbridge, 2000), 91–102.
- 5 New watermark evidence has revised the slightly later date proposed in *Cambridge University Library MS Ff. 2. 38*, ed. Frances McSparran and P. M. Robinson (London, 1979), p. xii. See Friedrich Hülsmann, 'The watermarks of four late medieval manuscripts containing *The Erle of Tolous*', *Notes and Queries*, 32 (1985), 11–12. M. B. Parkes ('The literacy of the laity', in David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby (eds), *The Medieval World* (London, 1973), pp. 555–78, at pp. 568–9) regards it as mid-fifteenth century.
- 6 *Cambridge University Library MS Ff. 2. 38*, ed. McSparran and Robinson, p. vii.
- 7 *Manuscript Tanner 346: A Facsimile: Bodleian Library, Oxford University*, ed. Pamela Robinson (Norman, Oklahoma, 1980), p. xvii. The words in inverted commas are a quotation from *Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16*, ed. John Norton-Smith (London, 1979), p. vii. We do not know who commissioned Tanner 346, but Fairfax 16 was assembled for a gentleman, John Stanley of Hooton, and Robinson assumes they emanate from similar elite milieux.
- 8 Derek Pearsall, 'The development of Middle English romance', *Medieval Studies*, 27 (1965), 91–116 (p. 92).
- 9 See A. McIntosh, M. Samuels and M. Benskin, *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval England*, 4 vols (Aberdeen, 1986), vol. 4, LP 531.
- 10 This is a variant version of *The Child of Bristow*, which has been discussed by Barbara Hanawalt, "'The Childe of Bristowe" and the making of middle-class adolescence', in Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (eds), *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England* (Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 155–78.
- 11 The Bolton Hours contains images and prayers relating specifically to York and Yorkshire, including St William of York and 'St' Richard Scrope, both archbishops of York, and St John of Beverley (in the East Riding), also archbishop.
- 12 William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, B text, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London and New York, 1978), XII. 146–7: 'Ne in none beggers cote was that barn born, / But in a burgeises place, of Bethlem the beste'. For a vivid distinction between these two kinds of housing,

- see Charles Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 80–1. On late-medieval housing types generally, see John Schofield, *Medieval London Houses* (New Haven, 1994); Jane Grenville, *Medieval Housing* (London, 1997).
- 13 John Collan, York, 1490: Borthwick Institute for Historical Research, Dean and Chapter of York, Probate Inventories, 1383–1499.
 - 14 For this group, see Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London [1300–1500]* (Ann Arbor, 1948); Jenny Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1998); Sarah Rees Jones, ‘The household and English urban government in the later middle ages’, in M. Carlier and T. Soens (eds), *The Household in Later Medieval Europe* (Leuven, 2001). I am working on a fuller account of the idea of domesticity among urban elites in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.
 - 15 The location of business or manufacture within the home marks off bourgeois domestic living from aristocratic life-styles.
 - 16 *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, ed. Carol Falvo Heffernan (Manchester, 1976). All quotations are from this edition.
 - 17 See *Florence de Rome: Chanson d’Aventure du Premier Quart du 13^e Siècle*, ed. A. Wallensköld, SATF, 2 vols (Paris, 1909). A complete version (formerly owned by d’Arcy Hutton, Marske Hall, Richmond, Yorks.) was copied in the late thirteenth century by an English scribe, while two leaves of another version survive as endleaves in a copy of Hilton’s *Speculum Contemplationis* (London, British Library, MS Lansdowne 362). The French poem was rewritten at least twice in French, and was translated into Spanish in the fourteenth century. The English translation in CUL Ff. 2. 38 was possibly made in the early fifteenth century. Its language is more northerly than that of the scribe.
 - 18 J. Burke Severs (ed.), *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500, I, Romances* (New Haven, 1967), p. 120. See also Karen A. Winstead, ‘Saints, wives, and other “hooly thynges”: pious laywomen in Middle English romance’, *Chaucer Yearbook: A Journal of Late Medieval Studies*, 2 (1995), 137–54.
 - 19 This paragraph and the next two are deeply indebted to conversations with Dr Cordelia Beattie of the Department of History, University of Edinburgh, and to her ‘Meanings of singleness: the single woman in late medieval England’, DPhil. dissertation, University of York, 2001.
 - 20 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson *et al.* (Oxford, 1988), Parson’s Tale, X. 867–8.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, *Knight’s Tale*, I. 1169 and 1171.
 - 22 For the sexualisation of virginity, see Kim Phillips, ‘Maidenhood’, in Katherine J. Lewis, Noel James Menuge and Kim Phillips (eds), *Young Medieval Women* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 1–24.
 - 23 See Beattie, ‘Meanings of singleness’, pp. 24–6 and 45–54.

- 24 There are two occasions when Florence is called 'wyfe' by other characters: the first is at line 1116, when Egravayne tells the Pope that in Emere's absence Mylys has tried to 'haue his wyfe'. At line 1301, when Mylys falsely tells Emere that Florence has imprisoned him during Emere's absence, he calls her 'thy wyfe'.
- 25 P. J. P. Goldberg, 'What was a servant?', in A. Curry and E. Matthew (eds), *Concepts and Patterns of Service in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 1–20.
- 26 Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, trans. Yael Lotan (London and New York, 1997), pp. 37–40.
- 27 See MED, tasten v. 2 (a), (b), (c). For maternal connotations, see the citation from Margery Kempe: 'Sche say owr Lady felyn and tastyn owr Lordys body ... ȝyf þer wer ony sorhed'.
- 28 The best-known example of the *fabliau* version of the old man's body is in Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale'; another is in Dunbar's 'The Two Married Women and the Widow', 89–119.
- 29 See MED, brisen v. 6; note the citation from ?Maidstone: 'Mercy, Lord ... Heele me, for bresid be my bones'.
- 30 *Ibid.*, brisen v. 1, 2, 4, 5.
- 31 *Ibid.*, thing n. 4. (c). These senses survive in modern usage, e.g., 'dear thing', 'pretty little thing'.
- 32 *Ibid.*, thing n. 4. (a).
- 33 See my 'Looking closely: domestic authority in the late-medieval urban home', in Mary Erler and Maryann Kowaleski (eds), *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and New York, 2003), pp. 190–212.
- 34 There is an excellent discussion in *Hali Meidhad*, ed. Bella Millett, EETS o.s. 284 (London, 1982), pp. xxx–xxxviii.
- 35 For edition, see previous note. There is a text and facing-page translation in *Medieval English Prose for Women from the Katherine Group and Ancrène Wisse*, eds Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Oxford, 1990), pp. 2–41. My quotations are from this translation.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 20–1.
- 38 For a brief and polemical account of medieval dualism, see Jacques le Goff, 'Body and ideology in the medieval West', in his *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago and London, 1985), pp. 83–5.
- 39 See, e.g., Caroline Walker Bynum, "'And woman his humanity": female imagery in religious writings of the later Middle Ages', in her *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), pp. 151–79.
- 40 Sharon Farmer presents an interesting critique of the dominant scholarly tendency to equate women with the body in 'The beggar's body: intersections of gender and social status in high medieval Paris', in Sharon Farmer and Barbara Rosenwein (eds), *Monks and Nuns, Saints and Out-*

casts: Religion in Medieval Society (Ithaca and London, 2000), pp. 153–71. Using the records of miracles assembled for the inquest into the sanctity of St Louis, Farmer shows that poor men were particularly associated with the body by the clerical compilers of this evidence for the saint's miraculous powers.

41 See *Le Bone Florence*, ed. Heffernan, p. 24.

42 For women's role in the care of the sick, see Carol Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud, 1995), chs 8 and 9.