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Medieval Mothers and their Children

The Case of Isabeau of Bavaria in Light of Medieval Conduct Books

While Philippe Aries's claim that during the Middle Ages "the idea of childhood did not exist" has provoked refutation among historians for decades, the notion remains a truism, and not without reason.[1] Medieval manuscript illuminations certainly indicate that children dressed like small adults, and the focus upon children characteristic of the modern family seems to be a relatively recent creation, as Aries suggested. Different from today, people of the Middle Ages did not privilege a baby's exclusive and intensely emotional relationship with a parent as crucial to its future development.[2] Abandonment appears to have been common among the less privileged classes.[3] Noble parents were often physically absent from their children's lives, sending them off to be fostered and using them as pawns in diplomatic marriage games.[4] This apparent indifference toward the

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1 See Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 128. The thesis of Aries is widely known and accepted by the general public. See, for example, Jeff Stryker's article in the *New York Times* of Sunday, July 13, 1997, "The Age of Innocence Isn't What It Once Was," and a review of Nicholas Orme's *Medieval Childhood* in the *Commonweal* for April 5, 2002, which states: "The gist of Aries's view has now percolated into general awareness: in premodern Europe, high infant mortality left parents emotionally detached from their children; adults regarded children as miniature adults, and both inhabited a culture without much sense of childhood as a distinct period of life."

2 Brigitte H. E. Niestroj historicizes the modern view of the bond between mothers and babies in "Les femmes en tant que meres et la formation de l'esprit européen. Une contribution à l'histoire de la psychologie du développement et de la socialisation premiere," *La petite enfance dans l'Europe médievale et moderne*, ed. Robert Fossier (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1997), 133–62.

3 However, abandonment waxed and waned with socio-economic shifts. See John Boswell's chapters on the phenomenon during the Middle Ages in *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

4 For positive perspectives on mother love during the Middle Ages see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), especially chapter 5, "'Mother of Love, Mother of Tears': Holiness and Families in the Later Middle

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emotions of children seems to indicate that they were not felt to be valuable in and of themselves, and that childhood was not considered a special and distinct status, worthy of protection.

Still, as Albrecht Classen observes in the introduction to this collection, a paradigm shift away from Aries's thesis is underway in the modern perception of medieval childhood, driven by the increased awareness that the study of childhood is in fact the study of a given culture's construction of childhood by and recent critical interest in the history of the emotions. In this essay I will argue that one reason for the perception that the medieval mother did not enjoy strong emotional bonds with her children is that noble society constructed her as an intercessor figure with little power of her own, inferior to her children's father, charged with perpetuating the values of her rigidly hierarchical society in her offspring. Much as she might love her children, her first responsibility was to her male superiors, as that mythical model of patience, Griselda, testifies.[5] The same was true of the Virgin Mary, exemplar of maternal intercession. Penny Schine Gold has noted that the Coronation of the Virgin imagery depicts Mary in glory, "while at the same time, with a bend of the head, adding the quality of humble submission."[6] She willingly accepted her son's death despite the sorrow it caused her. As Jaroslav Pelikan observes, "Mary had simultaneously lamented the death of Christ because he was her Son and welcomed it because he was her Savior and the Savior of the world."[7] Thus the Marian model suggests that a mother's mission should not be to keep her child close beside her, interfering in its destiny, but to do her utmost to see that destiny carried out, whatever the loss to herself. The *Mater Dolorosa* standing below her crucified son who figured prominently in Books of Hours—the single most common type of book among female owners during the period—glorified the maternal lot of suffering helplessly on the sidelines.[8] True,

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Ages," 144–93; Majorie Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and her Sons," 279–94; Lois L. Huneycutt, "Public Lives, Private Ties: Royal Mothers in England and Scotland, 1070–1204," 295–311; and Kimberly Lo Prete, "Adela of Blois as Mother and Countess," 313–33, all in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996). For a negative assessment of maternal attitudes see Ralph V. Turner, "Eleanor of Aquitaine and Her Children: An Inquiry into Medieval Family Attachment," *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988): 321–35.

5 Not one of the major medieval authors who tell Griselda's story—Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Christine de Pizan, the Ménagier of Paris—faults Griselda for placing her husband's commands before the welfare of her children.

6 Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 73.

7 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 126.

8 Susan Groag Bell writes that women who owned only one book were most likely to own a Book of Hours: "In cases where only one book could be attributed to a woman, the book was almost invariably a devotional item. These books of piety included Gospels, Psalters, lives of the saints, and, in large part, Books of Hours." "Medieval Women Bookowners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and

the argument that "all women resemble the Virgin Mary," writes Marina Warner, "is very rare, for every facet of the Virgin had been systematically developed to diminish not increase, her likeness to the female condition."[9] And yet, the Virgin's docile image was omnipresent, decorating Books of Hours, sermons, and the walls of Churches. Western society has not generally understood "paternal" love to be an innate universal drive, and thus, for the modern audience, the apparent distance between medieval fathers and their children arouses no particular discomfort. On the other hand, the idea that a mother would abandon or put her children out to be fostered seems abominable from a modern psychological perspective. However, when her principal role is understood as intercessory, these actions become more comprehensible. John Boswell notes that in Bordeaux in 1234 a council urged mothers who abandoned their children to leave them in cribs and place some salt beside them to signify that they had been baptized.[10] A woman abandoning her child was likely to do so because she could not take care of it, but she could facilitate its being taken into the care of others by leaving it in a safe place where it would be discovered. And as long as the child was baptized, society believed, the mother had performed her most significant duty, clearing the way for its entry into heaven. The habit of fostering also makes sense in the context of a society that saw the mother's function as mediator for her children, doing everything possible to maximize their chances for future success. In a world where insecurity and loss were the norm, offering one's child a better situation was an act of motherly love.

This is the framework within which medieval motherhood must be examined. It is not easy to recover the attitudes toward their own children and childhood in general from women so thoroughly embedded in a system that demanded their complicity and obedience, and especially from women who left virtually no personal writings. Much more can be gleaned about the means by which noble mothers of a slightly later period carried out their mediating activity on behalf of their offspring and how they felt about their families from correspondence that has survived, like that of the family and associates of Honor Lisle, wife of the governor of Calais under Henry VIII. Tirelessly active within her large network of family and friends and positively impressing many of her correspondents, Honor Lisle exemplifies how the feminine position of mediator could be used effectively.[11] However, nothing comparable to the Lisle letters exists for the fourteenth and

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Ambassadors of Culture," *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 149–87; here 160.

[9] See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), 153.

[10] See Boswell, 324.

[11] Muriel St. Clare Byrne has edited *The Lisle Letters* in 6 volumes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

fifteenth centuries. Thus more indirect approaches are necessary for this earlier period. Using as a filter the assumptions about mothers as mediating figures that emerge from two conduct books of the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth century, one by Christine de Pizan, and the other by the Knight of La Tour-Landry, I propose to re-examine the modern narrative of maternity that has been constructed around one notorious historical mother, the Queen of France, Isabeau of Bavaria, asking whether the crimes that have been attributed her are not products of a system that restricted her maternal role to one of mediation. The conduct books articulate and struggle in different ways with the ideal of motherhood as mediatrix in a rigidly hierarchical society. I will suggest that in their accounts of Isabeau as a terrible mother, historians have generally failed to take account of the constraints and contradictions that marked this medieval concept of motherhood, and that they have thus overlooked signs of the Queen's love for her children, producing a distorted image of her maternal qualities. This distorted image, I argue in my conclusion, is emblematic in many ways of modern re-constructions of medieval motherhood. As Eva Parra Membrives notes in her article on the recluse Frau Ava in this collection, the example of one woman cannot be taken as universal, for women are not necessarily similar: "Die hier exemplarisch untersuchten Fälle beanspruchen dabei selbstverständlich keinen Universalcharakter," she writes, "dürfen es natürlich auch nicht. Denn, obwohl sich viele dieser Texte weiblichen Ursprungs zuweilen in einigen . . . Stellen sehr eng berühren, ist Frau, und dies auch in mittelalterlichen Zeiten, nicht immer mit Frau gleichzusetzen"[12] ["These exemplary case studies do not, of course, claim universal validity, and of course must not. After all, although many texts by female authors share certain aspects here and there, woman, and this also in the Middle Ages, is not always identical with woman"]. But if the story of Isabeau does not permit sweeping generalizations about maternal emotions, I suggest that her fate and after-life do allow some generalizations on modern understandings of medieval motherhood. Her story represents the contradictory givens of medieval motherhood played out in a worst case scenario. The modern myth surrounding Isabeau might explain in part why Aries and others drew their conclusions regarding emotive relationships between parents and children.

[12] See Eva Parra Membrives's contribution to this volume, "Mutterliebe aus weiblicher Perspektive. Zur Bedeutung von Affektivität in Frau Avas Leben Jesu." 90–91.

Christine de Pizan's Livre des Trois Vertus

In the two female courtesy books I will examine here, the mother is constructed as her husband's deputy, charged with enforcing his authority, and one of her primary duties is to train her children to assume their social roles so that as adults they will perpetuate the ideals of their rigidly hierarchical society. From a mother's perspective, childhood was a metaphorical minefield, because of the high probability of early death. But it was all the more so because those who survived had to be trained early and decisively to assume responsibility for the continued success of their families. Medieval children, like their modern counterparts, were impulsive and unwilling to respect limitations. But unlike modern societies, which find nothing very disturbing in the erratic behavior of children, medieval societies were highly ambivalent toward the young, divided over whether they resisted authority out of inherent badness or simple lack of training.[13] The Augustinian legacy regarded youngsters as hopelessly corrupt by nature. On the other hand, the widespread iconography of the massacre of the innocents constructs children as guiltless victims, as Jean Jost writes in her contribution to this collection.[14] Regarding this ambivalence, Jean Batany reveals the common thread between the two views: "Le terme-clé est ici le mot *divers*, si important dans l'ethique du Moyen Age: le personnage *divers*, c'est celui dont on ne peut prévoir les actes, en qui on ne peut avoir confiance—une cause d'angoisse perpétuelle pour une époque toujours en quête de sécurité matérielle et morale." ["The key word here is *unpredictable*, so important to the ethos of the Middle Ages: the *unpredictable* character is someone whose actions we cannot foretell, in whom we have no confidence—a constant cause for worry in an age that was always in search of material and moral security."][15] As the intermediary preparing the way for her fickle offspring to enter into an unforgiving and strictly categorized society, the mother bore a heavy responsibility.

But even though she was ultimately responsible for transforming erratic youngsters into predictable adults capable of performing their allotted social roles, the mother had no real authority over her children; any she possessed was delegated to her by her husband. In the *Livre des Trois Vertus*, written in 1405 for the young Dauphine Marguerite of Burgundy, Christine de Pizan describes the

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[13] See also the discussion of early-modern childhood in Allison Coudert's contribution to this volume, "Educating Girls in Early Modern Europe and America."

[14] Jean Jost, "Medieval Children: Treatment in Middle English Literature."

[15] J. Batany, "Regards sur l'enfance dans la litterature moralisante," *Annales de Demographie Historique* (1973): 123–27; here 125. My translation.

role of motherhood with acute insight.[16] Because she sees the maternal role of mother as one aspect of the larger role of women within the household and society, I will begin by describing this more general position.

In the social world Christine describes, men frequently behave like violent thugs. The princess, writes Christine, is a mediator, a "moyenne de paix."[17] When social disruption threatens, she arbitrates between her husband the prince and warring lords,

> disant que le mesfait est moult grant et que a bonne cause en est le prince indignez, et que s'entente est de s'en vengier si comme il est raison, mais nonpourtant elle, qui vouldroit tousjours le bien de paix, ou cas que ilz se vouldroient amender ou en faire amande convenable, mettroit voulentiers peine d'essaier, se pacifier les pourroit vers son seigneur.
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> (saying that the misdeed was very serious and that with good cause the prince is angry about it, and that he intends to avenge himself for it as is right; nonetheless she, who would always want the good of peace, if they would like to make amends or make suitable reparations, would happily make an effort to try to find a way to pacify her husband.)[18]

Moreover, if her own husband is badly behaved (as he is likely to be, Christine avers) the wife will act as a mediator between him and God, increasing her own personal holiness as she persuades him through her loving guidance to reform: "ja l'omme si pervers ne sera que conscience et raison ne lui die: tu as grant tort et grant pechié contre ta bonne et honneste femme. . . ." [there will never be a man so perverse that conscience and reason do not tell him: you behave wrongfully and sinfully against you good and honest wife. . .].[19] However, the woman's intercessory role is mapped onto a hierarchy that allows men to ignore the advice of women if they choose. How then does the female exert her pacifying influence? Carefully and cleverly, through her diplomatically-expressed recommendations. She has no further power.

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[16] *Le Livre des Trois Vertus*, ed. and intro. Charity Cannon Willard (Paris: Champion, 1989). *Le Livre des Trois Vertus* addresses women from all levels of society, including even poor women and prostitutes. Of course, these addressees could not have read the book. Christine's purpose seems to have been to express a feeling of solidarity, demonstrating that they were all subject to similar constraints as women, even though their situations were very different.

[17] *Trois Vertus*, 35. On the queen as intercessor see John Carmi Parsons, "Ritual and Symbol in the English Medieval Queenship to 1500," *Women and Sovereignty*, ed. Louise Olga Fradenburg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 60–77.

[18] *Trois Vertus*, 34–35. My translations.

[19] *Trois Vertus*, 56. As for badly behaved husbands, Christine counsels against re-marriage for widows, noting that if conjugal life tended to be happy in general, perhaps it would be a good idea. But conjugal life is generally miserable! *Trois Vertus*, 193.

In her maternal role, a woman is subject to the same restrictions. The father makes all the important decisions about the children's education, choosing the tutor, for example, as Christine writes. The mother can only make suggestions: "Et mettra peine la sage dame qu'il plaise au pere qu'ilz [the children] soient introduis ou latin, et que aucunement sentent des sciences" [And the wise woman will make an effort to see that the father will agree to the children being introduced to Latin and other areas of knowledge].[20] But even though she has no direct authority over them, the mother will carefully watch over ("avisier," 59) all aspects of their well being, insuring that the tutors and caretakers hired by her husband are doing their jobs.[21] To this end, she will personally observe her children's moral and intellectual instruction (rather than relying upon the reports of others), visiting them in their rooms, putting them to bed and getting them up in the morning, even though the household includes others specifically engaged to do this.[22]

The loving mother, then, watches over her children, interceding on their behalf, although she has no direct power to make changes. Good mothering thus requires great powers of persuasion. This is all the more true when the mother in question is a widow. In this case it is up to her to mediate between her children and those who would snatch everything they possess from them, keeping the family estates intact until her children can fend for themselves. To her falls the duty of maintaining peace among the barons, who are inclined to rebel whenever a prince dies leaving only a minor in his place: "Adonc lui aura mestier tenir en amour les barons, afin que toujours soyent bons et loyaulx et de bon conseil a son enfant; les chevaliers, escuiers, et gentliz homes, afin que de plus grant cuer voulentiers and hardiement [se combatant] se mestier est, et maintiennent la guerre pour leur joenne seigneur. . . " [Thus she will need to maintain the love of the barons, so that they will always be good and loyal and offer good counsel to her child, as well as that of the knights and gentlemen, so that they will willingly and vigorously fight, if need be, and do battle for their young seigneur. . .].[23] Furthermore, the mother will mobilize the barons to support her son. At the same time she will control her son's behavior, eliciting generosity and nobility in him by reminding him of the loyalty his men bear him. With such words ["telz manieres de paroles"], she will move her son to treat his people well and thereby prevent rebellions.

As for the affective ties between the mediating mother and her children, certainly part of the supervising mother's motivation, according to Christine, is that looking out for one's children is praiseworthy. The loving "sage dame" will receive social approval: "si les bien tenir chierement, et est grant loz de dire que

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[20] *Trois Vertus*, 60.
[21] *Trois Vertus*, 59.
[22] *Trois Vertus*, 59.
[23] *Trois Vertus*, 85.

elle en soit soigneuse. . .."[as she holds them dear, andto say that she takes good care of them is great praise].[24] But if Christine is concerned about a mother's "loz" or praise, she nonetheless assumes that women genuinely love their offspring. They watch over their children in the first place because they are naturally inclined to do so: the "nature de mere" is "encline au regart de ses enfans" [inclined to watching over her children].[25] Her desire to see them well-brought up and educated is a function of her love for them. Christine writes that the "sage dame qui chierement les aimera sera diligente que ilz soient bien endoctinez. . ." [the wise woman who loves them will diligently make sure that they be well educated].[26] Nothing is more delightful than spending time with one's children, she writes, offering family time as an alternative to love affairs for the unhappily married: "Celles qui ont enfans, quelle plus grant plaisance ne plus gracieuse peut elle demander et plus delictable, que de souvent les veoir et prendre garde que bien soient nourriz et endoctrinez. . . [Those who have children, what greater or more gracious or more delightful pleasure could she ask than to see them often and take care that they be well-raised and instructed. . .].[27]

Christine's conduct book views motherhood, then, as one aspect of the larger mediating role women play in society. Fraught with contradiction, the role is manageable by those with a high degree of social intelligence— sharp skills of observation and the ability to dissimulate, immense tact and rhetorical ability. Loving her children dearly, the watchful and wise mother protects her sons from predators through the judicious exercise of her wit reinforced by an impeccable reputation. As for her daughters, she offers them an image of self-control, training them through her own example in how to maneuver in a society that severely disadvantages them ["le sage maintien d'elle sera exemple aux filles de semblablement eulx gouverner"].[28] The woman depicted in Christine's *Livre des Trois Vertus* is a fearless manipulator of a game whose rules she fully understands, a loving mother, and an example of how to carry out an extremely difficult job. Although Christine ostensibly grounds the role in personal morality, the person she describes is clever rather than good.

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[24] *Trois Vertus,* 59.
[25] *Trois Vertus,* 59.
[26] *Trois Vertus,* 60.
[27] *Trois Vertus,* 116.
[28] *Trois Vertus* , 61.

The Knight of La Tour-Landry

The successful assumption of motherhood in medieval French society as Christine describes it, then, was anything but straightforward. According to her, acting out the role of wife already required a knack for dissimulation, for swallowing anger when she was abused, for stroking egos. Men were often rash or just plain foolish, and because of this, apt to endanger the health of others as well as their own immortal souls. A wife needed to be cunning to keep her husband out of trouble. The role of motherhood added a layer of complication. Still required to obey, mothers had to juggle competing loyalties, intervening for their children while submitting to their husband.

The courtesy book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, *Le Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry pour l'enseignement de ses filles*, written around 1380, which the protagonist claims in his introduction to have composed out of love for his young daughters, similarly bespeaks the complicated position of the mother and suggests how it can be carried out successfully, although without the expression of feminine subjectivity that Christine's book evinces. Rather, the Knight's collection teaches from a male perspective how a mother should train her children.

The Knight's work manifests the complicated position of the mother in its very structure, which mimics the social practice Christine describes in assigning to the mother the role of moral educator of her small children but in leaving the serious decisions about education to the father. In the introduction to his collection, the Knight makes father and mother co-educators, writing that "tout père et mère selon Dieu et nature doit enseignier ses enfans et les destourner de male voye et leur monstrer le vray et droit chemin" [every father and mother according to God and nature should instruct their children and keep them from the wrong road and show them the true and right road. . .].[29] However, the Knight himself is the teacher in this book. The girls' mother appears in an episode only at the end, and then as a foil, ostensibly to challenge, but in fact to parrot her husband's beliefs, as I will discuss. The only other substantial reference to mothers takes the form of a group of eight stories about the first mother, Eve, who like many of the examples in this work represents a sneaky woman who gets caught. Although Eve and the Dame of La Tour-Landry signify opposite sides of the maternal spectrum, they incarnate the same mental capacity, and the same capacity demonstrated by Christine's women, cunning. But whereas the Dame of La Tour-Landry masters the skill, using it to her advantage, Eve does not. The book overwhelmingly makes the point that no one is to be trusted, and it constructs male/female relationships

[29] *Le Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry pour l'enseignement de ses filles*, ed. Anatole de Montaiglon (Paris: Jannet, 1854), 4.

as antagonistic contests where the woman usually loses, often as a result of "cosmic" justice. In fact, the Knight's subject matter moved Anthony Fitz-Herbert in 1534 in a book on husbandry to comment that the book in fact trains his readers in trickery by providing his readers with the models they would not have conceived of otherwise.[30] The choice of subject matter seems odd. And yet perhaps the choice is not so odd at all. For if the Knight ostensibly condemns trickery, as both he and Christine make clear, the successful wife and mother needs above all to be clever.

In its structure, then, the book reveals the extent to which the mother was the subject of her husband. This is equally visible in the content of the book. In the first of the tales devoted to Eve, the daughters are advised to shun the model of our first mother, whose fault lay in trusting her own opinion and failing to get Adam's advice before tasting the forbidden apple.[31] The moral is that a wife should ask her husband before she does anything. And yet, in another of the stories, Eve is castigated for taking advantage of Adam's stupidity. Even if she did not want to do good herself, she shouldn't have advised him to sin with her.[32] This attitude is part of a pattern established by the book of constructing the wife as mediator for her husband who through idiocy or boorishness tends to get himself in trouble with important people. The wife is counseled to go to te relevant authorities to rescue her husband; she must "par tout le sauver et garder comme son seigneur, combien qu'il soit fol ou divers, puisque Dieux le lui a donne" [in every way take care of him and keep him as her master, however foolish or unpredictable he may be, because God has given him to her].[33] This wastrel is of course the same to whom the wife must defer. Keeping such a ridiculous figure on the straight and narrow, all the while letting him believe that he is the master is a difficult task, requiring skill and duplicity. Eve, for her part, is not up to the task. Instead of helping Adam to overcome his sinful inclinations, she encourages him to err. One wonders why Adam did not assert himself in favor of obedience, given his right to command. Still, Eve bears the blame according to the Knight, and not only for herself. Her bad decision destroys the future for all her children, for all times. Motherhood is a heavy responsibility.

The Knight further illustrates the conflicts of motherhood in his framing material. Shortly before the end of the book he and his wife begin a debate over whether girls should partake of love games. He makes the case for carefully controlled pleasure, arguing that in certain cases a woman should love "par

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[30] *Chevalier*, xlix–li.
[31] *Chevalier*, 87.
[32] *Chevalier*, 94–95.
[33] *Chevalier*, 180.

amours."[34] He is vigorously refuted by his wife, who obviously has been affected by his view of the world as teeming with tricksters. She asserts that because no one can ever be trusted, women should protect themselves against all men. Long before the debate on love, the Knight had already made his position on flirtation plain, describing himself as a bachelor meeting a prospective wife. Although his potential fiancée was "belle et bonne" and spoke wonderfully well, she seemed too "apperte," as if she had known him all her life. On the way home with his father after the meeting, the Knight announced that he did not want to marry her because of this fault. It is odd then that he is encouraging his daughters to act in a way that honorable men find disturbing. What is the wife to do? Agree with her husband before the daughters or dispute a position he himself has already condemned?

The wife is being set up, like Eve. But she recognizes what is being done to her. She picks up on her husband's contradiction, gently reminding him of his earlier rejection of the talkative young woman to support her argument that she does not want her daughters to engage in flirtation. She responds to her husband's challenge by watching out for her girls' honor, offering the only possible response a mother could offer within the context of a society that so severely chastized a girl's pleasure. Like Christine's wife, she is fiercely protective of her children and therefore plays according to the rules of the game, uttering what her husband and all men want to hear. True, the Knight chides his wife for being "moult malle et estrange et orguilleuse en amours" [very bad and distant and arrogant in love].[35] And yet he is not serious, for he allows her to finish the debate with the last word, which is really his own. The girls must be careful never to let themselves be beholden to anyone else, because they will be too easily taken advantage of. It is a good thing to be aware of this social verity in advance, the Dame of La Tour-Landry concludes: "Si est bon de toutes avisier avant le coup."[36]

The Knight puts his wife to the test in front of his daughters, pretending to try to convince her and his daughters with his arguments in favor of a pleasurable and harmless pastime. But the wife is too clever to fall for his bait. She is the ideal mother, applying to her husband's hypotheticals the lessons she has absorbed from him, all the while handling him without offending him.

The Maternal Isabeau

Isabeau of Bavaria (ca. 1371–1435) is the very epitome of the mediator mother Christine and the Knight describe, an intercessor kept from exercising any

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[34] *Chevalier*, 247.
[35] *Chevalier*, 261.
[36] *Chevalier*, 265.

authentic control over her children as she struggled to supervise their upbringings. But unlike Christine's princess and the Knight's wife, she did not manage her difficult position effectively, although it is impossible to know whether this failure was due to lack of the requisite social skill or because the events that marked her life were simply beyond the control of any woman, no matter how diplomatically talented, to manage.

In any case, Isabeau's modern reputation as a mother is notorious. According to legends tenaciously maintained by popular historians as well as historians working in areas tangential to the Queen, like the Hundred Years War and Joan of Arc, she was more interested in satisfying her extravagant tastes than in caring for her children. Philippe Erlanger asserts:

> Isabeau avait depuis longtemps épuisé les joies de la maternité. Une nouvelle grossesse ne pouvait la réjouir qu'en lui offrant le pretexte de se faire octroyer encore quelque bagatelle, un droit de péage, une abaye, un châteua entoure de bonnes terres. La Bavaroise aimait les richesses.[37]
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> For a long time Isabeau had taken no pleasure in maternity. She enjoyed a new pregnancy only because it offered her the pretext to give herself a present, the rights to a toll road, a new abbey, a chateau surrounded by good land. The Bavarian woman loved riches.

Furthermore, she is said to have fathered an illegitimate son with her husband's brother, Louis Duke of Orleans, a son who grew into Charles VII— the Charles VII led to Rheims by Joan of Arc. She is then supposed to have revealed the truth about her son's illegitimate paternity in the Treaty of Troyes of 1420 for the purpose of preventing his accession to the throne, thereby handing the kingdom of France over to the English King Henry V. Mary Gordon's biography of Joan of Arc expresses the popular view of the relationship between Isabeau and her son: "The complications of Isabeau's relationship with Charles [her husband, Charles VI], her disloyalty to her son and the kingdom of France, are perplexing to the point of incomprehensibility. . . a mother explicitly supporting her son's enemies and implicitly casting doubts not only on his legitimacy, but on her own sexual probity."[38]

Historians focusing upon the Queen have insisted for over twenty years that the Treaty of Troyes says nothing at all about Charles's paternity and that neither the English nor the French public of the time believed that it did. Isabeau's promiscuity and disinheritance of her son as a bastard are fictions created around the time

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[37] Philippe Erlanger, *Charles VII et son mystere* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 2.

[38] Mary Gordon, *Joan of Arc: A Penguin Life* (New York: Viking, 2000), 34–35.

of her death for political purposes.[39] As I will show, Isabeau's contemporaries recognized the limits of her power and those on her side in the civil war that divided France of her time viewed her situation as mother forced against her son with sympathy. Many contemporary documents suggest that her maternal qualities were excellent, and no contemporary document implies anything else.[40] And yet the story of Isabeau as unfit mother continues to be passed along, despite the existence of numerous studies that caution against reading charges of monstrous motherhood and promiscuity uncritically. In what follows, I will attempt to account for this unwarranted impression, showing how evidence of Isabeau's affection for her children and her efforts to insure the best possible lives for them has been ignored in favor of a narrative produced by the irreconcilable demands placed upon the Queen as wife and mother.

Under ordinary circumstances, Isabeau would have spent her life supervising the education of the twelve children she bore, six boys and six girls, between the years of 1386 and 1407. But because beginning in 1392 her husband Charles VI suffered from increasingly prolonged periods of madness that continued throughout his entire adult life, she was forced to act out the role of mediator in a very public way. The King gave her authority to help govern the realm during his periods of insanity, but required that her decisions be approved by a council that included among others his uncle Philip Duke of Burgundy (who was replaced after his death in 1404 by his son, John the Fearless) and his brother Louis Duke of Orleans.[41] But taking advantage of the King's illness to increase their power, the

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[39] For rehabilitations of Isabeau see R. C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue at the Court of Charles VI* (New York: AMS Press, 1986) and *Tales of the Marriage Bed from Medieval France (1300–1500)* (Providence, RI: Picardy Press, 1992). More recent are the works of Marie-Véronique Clin, *Isabeau de Baviere* (Paris: Perrin, 1999) and Philippe Delorme, *Isabeau de Bavière: Epouse de Charles V, Mère de Charles VII* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003). Rachel Gibbons offers a concise history of Isabeau's defamation in "Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of France (1385–1422): The Creation of an Historical Villainess," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* series 6.6 (1996a): 51–73. Earlier Marina Warner had disputed the story of Charles VII's supposed illegitimacy in *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1981), 57–59. On that topic see also Charles T. Wood, *Joan of Arc and Richard III: Sex, Saints and Government in the Middle Ages* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 125–51, and Charles Autrand, *Charles VI: La Folie du roi* (Paris: Fayard, 1986), 588–89. For a re-evaluation of the Queen as mother see Yann Grandeau's "Les Enfants de Charles VI: essai sur la vie privée des princes et des princesses de la maison de France à la fin du moyen age," *Bulletin philologique et historique* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1969): 809–32.

[40] See Grandeau's dismissal of the oft-quoted anecdote of the Religieux de Saint-Denis that Isabeau neglected her children. The Religieux, partisan of the Burgundians, picked up a rumor that was being spread by John the Fearless of Burgundy, "Les Enfants de Charles VI," 823.

[41] Many of the ordinances relative to Isabeau are available in the *Ordonnances des rois de France de la troisième race*, 21 vols. (Paris: De l'Imprimerie nationale, 1723–1849). See for example the ordinance of April, 1403, spelling out that all decisions during the King's "absences" be made by majority rule, *Ordonnances*, vol. 8, 578.

King's uncle, Philip of Burgundy, and the King's brother, Louis of Orleans, fell into an escalating conflict. Viewing Isabeau as a peaceful and objective force, Charles charged the Queen with acting as their arbitrator.[42] However, she had no means of enforcing the accords she helped to bring about between the warring Dukes. As modern historian Jacques d'Avout describes her peace efforts, they were "sans valeur, puisqu'il manque au sommet du bel édifice l'autorité continue, seule capable d'en faire respecter les dispositions" [useless, because continuous authority the top of the chain of command, necessary for enforcement, is lacking].[43] Contemporary observers, likewise aware of the uselessness of Isabeau's repeated interventions, suggested sterner measures than mediation. The Religieux of St. Denis writes that representatives from the University of Paris called upon the King to insist that the hatred between the dukes was implacable and that the only way out of the escalating violence was to create a new government run by wise men devoted to the public welfare. Although charged with maintaining peace, Isabeau was prevented from success by her lack of serious authority.

Isabeau's maternal role was as circumscribed as her political one. Here too she did not simply acquire duties by right; they were delegated to her by the King.[44] True, as a mother she was viewed as the person most inclined by nature to care for her children, and yet her role in their upbringing was strictly limited. A year after Charles's first bout of mental illness, in an ordinance of January, 1393, the King named Isabeau co-guardian of her children, including the Dauphin, Louis, the Duke of Guyenne.[45] In language that foreshadows that of Christine's *Trois Vertus*, the ordinance states that mothers are to be preferred above all other possible guardians, because their natural interest in their children's welfare is greater than that of any other relative: "la mere a greigneur et plus tendre amour à ses enfans, et a le cuer plus doulz et plus soigneux de les garder et nourrir amouresuement, que quelconque autre personne, tant leur soit prochaine linage, et quant à ce doit estre preferée à touz autres..." [the mother has a greater and more tender love for her children, and with a soft and caring heart takes care of and nourishes them

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[42] Printed in L. Douët-D'Arcq, *Choix de pieces inedites relatives au regne de Charles VI*, 2 vols. (Paris: Renouard, 1863), vol. 1, 227–39.

[43] Jacques d'Avout, *La Querelle des Armagnacs et des Bourguignons*(Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 125–26.

[44] That the mother did not hold any automatic rights over her chidlren was true ofnon-noble famlies as well. Even when widowed, the mother was not necessarily assigned guardianshipof her children. See, for example, Julie Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy: Gender and the Politics of Household Authority in Early Modern France* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 121.

[45] The ordinances do not tell a transparent story, however. It is not always known whether they were published or registered. Also, it is not always clear whether the actors involved were complicit. For example, Famiglietti argues that the ordinances of 1409transferring Isabeau's guardianship of the Dauphin to John the Fearless should not be seen, as it generally has been, as a wresting of authority from the Queen, but as an act undertaken at her instigation, 82–83.

more lovingly than any other person, no matter how closely related, and for this reason, she is to be preferred above all others. . .].[46] But as Christine and the Knight of La Tour-Landry knew, women were subject to the higher authority of their husbands or male relatives, and therefore could not singly act as guardians for their children. Thus the ordinance goes on to qualify its promotion of mothers as guardians, stipulating that because women must follow the advice of their wise and powerful male relatives [dames doivent estre acompaignées et conseilliées, des plus prochains parens d'elles et de leurs enfans, qui soient saiges et puissans . . ." [women should be accompanied and advised by the closest relations to them and to their children, who are wise and powerful]. Just as her position on the governing council was limited by the other members, Isabeau's maternal authority was subject to the agreement of Charles' male relations, the dukes of Berry, Burgundy, and Bourbon, as well as her own brother, Louis Duke of Bavaria. Moreover, to assist this group, a council of twelve, including three prelates, six nobles, and three clerics, were named.

The real limits of Isabeau's rights over her children are vividly demonstrated in an incident of August, 1405. The Dauphin, Louis of Guyenne, was a pawn in the power struggle between Louis Duke of Orleans and John the Fearless. The Dauphin resided with his mother, who cared for him in his day to day life. Fearing an attack by John the Fearless who was threatening to march upon Paris, Louis and Isabeau fled Paris for safety. But they realized that they would arouse suspicions if they departed with the Duke in tow. Thus Isabeau and Louis left the boy in the care of Isabeau's brother, Louis of Bavaria, with instructions to follow a day later. However, John the Fearless physically diverted the boy as he was on his way to join his mother. The vehement written protest of Louis of Orleans in response to John's intervention suggests how little Isabeau's authority counted when it presented an obstacle to his personal objectives: "Et nous merveillons et non sans cause," Louis fulminates, "quel povoir et quele auctorité avoit cellui ou ceulx ce ont entreprins de fait d'oster à ma dicte dame le gouvernement de ses enfans que mon seigneur en la présence de nous tous lui avoit donné, et la priver de la veue d'iceulx, car plusieurs de nous sommes plus prouchains à pourveoir à la seureté de monseigneur de Guienne s'il y failloit pourveoir, que cellui ou ceulx qui si hastiement s'i sont avanciez" [And we wonder, and with good reason, by what power and authority he or those who undertook to wrest from my Lady the governance of her children, which my Lord had given to her in the presence of all of us, and to deprive her of the sight of them; for many of us are in a better position to guarantee the safety of Monseigneur of Guyenne if it needed to be guaranteed, than he or those who so hastily advanced upon him].[47]

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[46] See *Ordonnances*, vol. 7, 530.

[47] Douet-D'Arcq, *Choix de pieces inédites relatives*, vol. 1, 276.

Although restricted in her authority, Isabeau seems to have been an attentive mother who enjoyed life-long relationships with her children. She kept her children alongside her at the Hôtel Saint-Pol while they were small, where she could watch over them, as Christine de Pizan suggested a mother should do, and when she left Paris she often took them with her.[48] She had good reason to be concerned for her children's welfare, for they seem not to have been a healthy group, with the majority dying tragically young. She lost all but one of her six sons, and only two of her six daughters outlived her. Her first born, Charles, lived only three months. Her second son, also named Charles, lived for nearly ten years. Louis of Guyenne died in 1415, just short of 19. John of Touraine then became the Dauphin, but died in 1417. Philip, the youngest, died at birth. Only Charles (third of that name) lived to adulthood. Of her daughters, Katherine and Marie outlived their mother by just a few years, with the others dying in childhood or early adulthood. Ariès suggests that the probability that one's children would die young must have prevented parents from growing attached to them.[49] Was this true of Isabeau? The deep distress that she displayed at the death of her youngest son militates against the notion that medieval parents regarded their children as dispensable. Premature, Philip was born dead in 1407. The Queen's emotional disarray at this loss is poignantly recorded by the Religieux of St. Denis: "Infantis immatura mors materna viscera conturbavit, totumque tempus purgacionis regina continuavit in lamentis" [The premature death of the baby throw her into agony, and throughout the time of the delivery, the Queen continued to lament].[50] Afterwards, the Religieux continues, Louis of Orleans paid her frequent visits to comfort her.

How did she bear the loss of so many children, given her apparent emotional investment in them? One of Isabeau's outstanding characteristics was her piety.[51] Her apparently intense devotion to the Virgin Mary may have given her strength to face the sorrow that was so much a part of medieval motherhood. Marcel Thibault reports that Isabeau received as a New Year's present from her husband a diptych with a picture of the Virgin Mary and a mirror adoring the outward facing panels. The payment for repairs to the diptych's hinges and the replacement of some of its pearls indicates that Isabeau made use of the gift. For Thibault, the gift seemed to appeal to two principal aspects of Isabeau's personality: devotion

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[48] See Grandeau, "Les Enfants de Charles VI," 824.

[49] See Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* 39.

[50] *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys contenant le regne de Charles VI*, de 1380–1422, ed. et trans. M. L. Bellaguet, 6 vols., (Paris: Crapelet, 1844; reprinted Editions du Comite des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 1994), vol. 5, 730.

[51] See Rachel Gibbons, who cites Thibault in "The Piety of Isabeau of Bavaria," *Courts, Countries and the Capital in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Diana E. S. Dunn (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 205–24.

and vanity.[52] It seems plausible, however, that for a pious young mother the juxtaposition of her own face with that of the Virgin's would have helped her to model herself after the holiest of mothers. Further evidence of Isabeau's relationship to the Virign is offered by Auguste Vallet de Viriville who writes that Isabeau possessed "successivement et simultanément un nombre assez considerable de *Livres d'heures*" or Books of Hours.[53] Mary occupied a central position in these works, and a bereaved mother meditating upon the sorrows of Virgin would have found comfort there.

Other signs of Isabeau's affection include the fact that in 1399 when the plague struck Paris, she sent her children into the country for safety, but remained behind herself with the baby, who was too small to transport safely. While the children were away, she wrote letters to them; the accounts record a payment to "Jehannin le Charron" for delivering letters to the Dauphin.[54] The devotional books purchased by Isabeau for her children signal her interest in their moral and intellectual education.[55] Records of pets purchased—parrots for Isabelle, Jeanne and Michelle, and turtledoves for Katherine—birthday presents, toys, and clothes for special occasions also indicate maternal interest.[56] After the marriage of her daughter Jeanne to the Duke of Brittany, Jeanne came to stay with Isabeau for several months over the summer of 1415, and her daughter Katherine visited her mother while she was being held by the Burgundians leading up to the Treaty of Troyes.[57]

Like other noble children, Isabeau's were separated from her at tender age. Her daughter Marie was sent to a convent at Poissy when she was less than five years old. But she was not abandoned. Marie-Véronique Clin explains:

> Marie n'est cependant pas seule. Sa mere laisse auprès d'elle les dames d'honneur qui l'ont toujours servie, elle a aussi fait aménager sa cellule pour la rendre plus accueillante. En bonne mere soucieuse du confort de sa petite fille, elle veille à ce que, l'hiver, ses robes de novice soient fourrées d'hermine et non pas de vulgaire lapin, comme celles des autres religieuses, et elle ordonne que la pension de cent livres soit régulièrement versée. Isabeau demande aussi une dispense au pape pour que Marie puisse sortir de son couvent pour venir auprès d'elle à Saint-Pol lorsqu'elle le désirera.

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[52] See Gibbons, "Piety," 212. The reference is to Marcel Thibault, *Isabeau de Bavière: la Jeunesse* (Paris: Perrin et cie, 1903), 170.

[53] Auguste Vallet de Viriville, "La Bibliothèque d'Isabeau de Bavière,"*Bulletin du Bibliophile*14 (188): 663–87 ; here 669.

[54] Grandeau, "Les Enfants de Charles VI," 824.

[55] There are detailed in Vallet de Viriville, 668–69.

[56] Gibbons, "Mannequin," 390. See also Grandeau, "Les Enfants de Charles VI," 826–30, for descriptions of the royal children's wardrobes.

[57] Gibbons,"Creation of a Historical Villainess," 58.

> La religieuse reste en relation épistolaire avec sa mere, ses frères, et ses soeurs, ces derniers ne l'oublient jamais dans leurs presents d'etrennes.
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> But Marie was not abandoned. Her mother left with her the same ladies of honor who had always served her, and she also had the girl's cell made as comfortable as possible. As a good mother who cared about her daughter's comfort, she made sure that the girl's novice robes were lined with ermine and not ordinary rabbit, like those of the other nuns, and she arranged for a pension of one hundred "livres" to be paid regularly. Isabeau also requested a papal dispensation to allow Marie to leave the convent to visit her mother at Saint-Pol whenever she wished. The nun communicated by letter with her mother, her brothers, and her sisters, who never forgot to send her New Year's gifts.

Marie was not alone, however. Her mother left with her the ladies of honor who had always served her, and she arranged for her room to be as comfortable as possible. As a good mother concerned for her daughter, she made sure that in winter, her daughter's novice robes were lined with ermine, rather than plain rabbit, like those of the other sisters, and she ordered an income of 100 livres to be paid regularly. Isabeau also requested a papal dispensation so that Marie could leave the convent to join the family at the Hotel St. Paul when she wished. The young sister corresponded regularly with her family, and they never forgot her in their New Years' gifts.[58]

Her daughter Isabelle was sent off to become the Queen of Richard II of England at nine. Froissart reports that the Queen was living in the Hôtel St. Pol with her children when she was requested by English ambassadors to introduce them to her daughter, Isabelle, which she did. Isabelle was very well educated and mannered ("endoctrinée") for her age, and the ambassadors found her delightful. Asked whether she would like to be the queen of England, Isabelle responded: "Se il plaist à Dieu et à monseigneur mon père que je soye royne d'Angleterre, je le verray voulentiers, car on m'a bien dit que je seroie une grande dame" [If it pleases God and monsieur my father that I be queen of England, I would like it very much, because I have been told that I would be a great lady].[59] According to Froissart, Isabeau was overjoyed at the response of her daughter, as were all those looking on. After the little Isabelle departed, she was not forgotten. When Richard II was murdered and the girl herself held as a virtual prisoner by the new king, Henry IV, Charles and Isabeau suffered intense anxiety as they negotiated for her return. A series of documents related to the event describe how ambassadors were instructed to assure the girl that her rescue was underway and to urge her not to agree to any marriage plans Henry IV might propose to her. In the meantime, if

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[58] Marie-V'eronique Clin, *Isabeau de Baviere* (Paris: Perrin, 1999), 125.

[59] Jean Froissart, *Oeuvres de Froissart*, ed. Joseph Kervyn de Lettenhove, 25 vols. (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1967), vol. 15, 186.

they could speak to the girl alone, they were to tell her how much she was missed and ask her to do all she could to come home: "Se ilz peuvent parler a elle à part, lui diront que le Roy et la Royne la désirent moult veoir, et que elle mette la diligence que ele pourra à ce que tost puist retourner devers eulx" [If they can speak to her alone, they will tell her that the King and the Queen desire greatly to see her, and that she should do all she can to see that she return quickly].[60] The Religieux of St. Denis describes the joy of the parents when their most beloved daughter ("dilectissimam filiam") returned safely. Her mother took charge of her again ("genetrix gubernadam recipiens") and although Isabelle's status in her mother's household was necessarily less what she had enjoyed as the Queen of England, Isabeau surrounded the girl with ladies who were even nobler than those who had surrounded her before her departure.[61] Isabeau arranged politically useful marriages for her own children. Still, it is clear that her emotional bonds with them were strong.

Perhaps the clearest sign that Isabeau was deeply attached to her children even though she sent them early into different households is her reaction to the removal of her son John of Touraine to his new in-laws' home just after his wedding. The Religieux of St. Denis describes her dismay at learning that John was to be taken from her care and raised in the home of his new wife in Hainaut. After the wedding festival, the Religieux reports, the Countess of Hainaut wanted to take the Duke of Touraine with her. The Queen indicated her extreme opposition. The two women argued. But Isabeau could not prevent John's departure; it had been written into the marriage treaty that the Duke was to be raised in Hainaut by his in-laws. It appears that the King was suffering one of his periods of madness at the time of the wedding, for the Religieux notes that John left with his in-laws, but that when the Count of Hainault learned that the King was healthy once again, he returned to court to request that John's education be left in his hands definitively.[62] Unlike the Queen, the King was happy to accede to the demand, and naturally his will took precedence over hers. The children's lives were ultimately in the hands of their father, not their mother.

But it was the fostering of her youngest surviving son, Charles—later Charles VII of France—that eventually caused Isabeau the greatest heartache.[63] In

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[60] Douet-D'Arcq, *Choix de pieces inedites relatives* vol. 1, 194.

[61] Religieux de St. Denis, *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys* vol. 4, 6.

[62] Religieux de St. Denis, *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys* vol. 5, 393–95.

[63] Once again Philippe Erlanger offers a completely unsubstantiated assessment of Isabeau's maternal emotions, describing her reaction to Charles's departure in a way suggestive of how modern readers have misunderstood medieval motherhood. "Cet enfant s'etiolait dans la grande ville, pleine de menaces, de bruit, d'odeurs fetides. Le calme des bords de Loire l'apaiserait, lui donnerait des forces. Isabeau acquiesça, indifferente. Elle avait déjà livré de la meme façon Jean de Touraine au comte de Hainaut, son beau-pere" (27).

December, 1413, the ten-year-old Charles was married to Marie, daughter of the Duke of Anjou. Yolande Duchess of Anjou took the two children with her to Anjou, in February, 1414, most likely to keep them out of peril.[64] The winter of 1414 was a particularly dangerous time in Paris, with John the Fearless menacing the capital with his army. The Duke and Duchess of Anjou were firmly of the Armagnac party, opposed to John and the Burgundians, the party on behalf of whom Isabeau would eventually sign the Treaty of Troyes. The young Charles, influenced by his wife's family, became a central figure in the Armagnac party, supported financially and militarily by his mother-in-law. The system of fostering set Isabeau and her son on opposite sides of the civil war.

How did the myth of the monstrous mother who disinherited her youngest son as a bastard develop around a devotee of the Virgin who seems so clearly to have loved her children? To answer this question it is necessary to return to the entry of John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy, onto the political stage, because it is for plotting the assassination of this powerful and influential figure that Charles VII was disinherited by his father.

During the years of unrest brought on by the struggle for power among Charles VI's relatives, Isabeau allied herself first with one and then with the other of the Dukes, depending upon who happened to be posing the greater threat to her family. She has been criticized as opportunistic for this. One historian claims that her various alliances profited her personally: "Benefiting from the upheavals, the opportunistic Isabeau increased her wealth and power but preferred a life of entertainment and celebration to the establishment of political domination. According to the drift of the moment, she allied herself with whomever seemed likely to triumph: first her brother-in-law Duke Louis of Orleans, and after his assassination, his murderer Duke John the Fearless of Burgundy."[65] However, what has been seen as political opportunism can better be regarded as a sign of maternal concern: the Queen was attempting to protect the Dauphin. She realistically feared for her own life and for that of her son after Louis's assassination. In finally allying herself with John in a treaty of November 11, 1409, she was moving from one threatening situation into what she perceived to be a less threatening one.[66] Her fear grew when on March 8, 1408, Jean Petit presented a discourse at the Hôtel Saint-Pol, justifying John the Fearless's act. Three days later,

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[64] In her biography of Charles of Orleans Enid McLeod asserts without proof or reference that Yolande served as a surrogate mother to Charles, because "his own mother Isabeau made no secret of her dislike for him." *Charles of Orleans: Prince and Poet*(New York: Viking Press, 1969), 199.

[65] Andre Poulet, "Capetian Women and the Regency: The Genesis of a Vocation," *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 93–116; here 115.

[66] See Jean Verdon, *Isabeau de Bavière: La Mal-Aimée* (Paris: Tallandier, 1981), 160–61; Vaughan, 79–82. Famiglietti, however, disputes the common assumption that Isabeau was motivated by intimidation, 80–81.

Isabeau fled Paris with the Dauphin, holing up with him at her citadelle in Melun.[67] The Religieux de Saint Denis reports that she ordered the citadelle guarded night and day.[68] The execution of John of Montaigu, *grand maitre* in charge of the King's household, on October 17, 1409, at the instigation of John the Fearless and despite the vigorous interventions of Isabeau, frightened her to the point that she decided to join forces with John. The suggestion that she signed on with John for personal gain is untenable, for he lacked money himself: on September, 1410, she lent him 7,000 golden francs.[69]

Isabeau and the Dauphin broke with John and allied herself with Charles of Orleans of the Armagnac party on January 29, 1414, after the Cabochian Revolt. Blaming John for the catastrophic uprising, the royal family ordered him to desist from any action harmful to the people of France. John, nonetheless, descended upon Paris with his army. In December of 1416, the Dauphin died, followed the next year by his brother, John of Touraine. This left the 14-year-old Charles, who was supported by the Armagnacs. In 1419, the Armagnacs exiled Isabeau to Tours, under the pretext of the loose morality of her court at Vincennes, but in fact in an attempt to rid themselves of her influence. From her captivity in Tours she called upon John the Fearless for deliverance, which he provided. In a horrific massacre in Paris in 1418, the Burgundians seized control of the King from the Armagnacs, killing their leader, Bernard VII. Finally, John the Fearless was assassinated by partisans of the Dauphin Charles.

For this crime, which aggravated an already chaotic political situation, Charles VI—not Isabeau—disinherited his son, an act formalized in the Treaty of Troyes in May, 1420. Indisposed on the day of the signing, Charles was represented by the Queen. Thus the act of disinheriting her son has been incorrectly attributed to Isabeau and held against her as a sign of her monstrous motherhood.[70] Philip the Good, son and successor of John the Fearless, persuaded King Charles to conclude the Treaty of Troyes with the English, an agreement by which the Dauphin was disinherited for his part in the parricide, and Henry V—to be married to Charles and Isabeau's daughter, Katherine—named heir to the throne. Isabeau's opinion of the matter is not known.[71] But whatever motives have been attributed to her by modern readers, her contemporary allies saw both her and the King as victims of

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[67] See Verdon, *Isabeau de Baviere*, 151; d'Avout, *La Querelle des Armagnacs*, 100.

[68] Religieux de Saint Denis, *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys* vol. 3, 767.

[69] See Verdon, p. 162, footnote 29. According to Verdon, the transaction is recorded in the Archives Côte-d'Or, B 1562, fol. 107.

[70] See the Religieux de St. Denis, *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys*, vol. 6, 382–84, who describes the King's displeasure and the public censures of Charles's actions.

[71] Even Philip did not seek the treaty. His position was that it was the "moindre mal." Recognizing that Henry would take over France with or without his consent, he decided to back the English and retain his position of influence. See Autrand, *Charles VI*, 584–86.

Philip, who negotiated the terms with Henry V. The *Réponse d'un bon et loyal François*, written in the winter of 1420, in reaction to peace accord concluded between Philip and Henry V in December, 1419, at Arras, thus just prior to the signing of the Treaty of Troyes in May of 1420, records a contemporary view of the Queen as a dupe of the Burgundians, tricked like the King and the people of France by the language of the treaty, which was Latin.

> iii. Considerez la premiere malice, car ce traictiés ilz ont fait et formé en latin contre le commun usaige des tracitiez qui souloient ester faiz entre François et Anglois; et ce ont fait afin que plus legierement et couvertement puissent estre induiz ceulx qui n'entendront (point le) latin a l'accorder, comme le roy, la royne, madame Katherine et la plus grant partie des nobles, bourgeois et autres du royaume, et car le latin puet avoir plus divers entendemens par equivocation que le François.
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> iii. Consider the first trick, for they made and formed the treaty in Latin, against the common usage of treaties between the French and the English; and they did this because those who do not understand Latin can be more easily and covertly persuaded, like the King, the Queen, and Madame Katherine and the greatest part of the nobles, bourgeois, and others of the kingdom, for Latin is more susceptible to equivocation than French.[72]

The *Répons d'un bon et loyal François* goes on to make the point that Isabeau and Katherine were being held against their will by the Burgundians men at arms: ""viii. Considerez en quelle liberté et franchise ont esté et sont la royne et sa fille, madame Katherine, qui se sont voulu partir de Troyes, la ou elles estoient comme l'en dit, mais on ne l'a pas souffert jusques a tant que on les ait mises es mains des anciens ennemis du roy et du royaume et d'elles mesmes, par espoventement et force de gens d'armes" [viii. Consider whether the Queen and her daughter, Madame Katherine, have been or are free; they wanted to leave Troyes, where they were, as they say, but this was not permitted; they were delivered into the hands of the ancient enemies of the King and the kingdom and of themselves, by terror and the force of men at arms].[73]

The story of Isabeau as an unnatural mother who sold her son's rights to maintain her own position claims not only that her alliance with the Burgundians was motivated by opportunism, but that with the Treaty of Troyes she denied the paternity of Charles to invalidate his claims to the throne with the goal of strengthening her own position within the Burgundian network. Although historians have recognized that the Treaty of Troyes implies nothing about the paternity of Charles VII, she continues to be blamed for signing it at all. It should be noted, however, that Isabeau and her son were not enemies even after the

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[72] In Nicole Pons, *L'Honneur de la Couronne de France: Quatre libelles contre les Anglais* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1990), 123.

[73] *Repons*, 124.

assassination of John the Fearless. In late December of 1419, Isabeau was still in communication with him, because a letter, although lost today, elicited a warm response from him that does exist.[74]

The notion that Isabeau disinherited her son came into existence only after her death, based upon a mistranslation of a common expression used in the treaty, "so-called" ("soi-disant"). The context is as follows: "[C]onsiderz les orribles et enormes crimes et deliz perpetrez oudit Royaume de france par Charles soy disant daulphin de viennois, il est accorde que nous ne nostre filz le Roy henry ne aussi nostre treschier filx phelippe duc de Bourgogne ne traicterons aucunement de paix our de concorde avecques ledit Charles, ne ferons our ferons traictier se non du conseil et assentement de tous et chascun de nous trois, et des troiz estas de deux Royaumes . . ." [Considering the horrible and enormous crimes perpetrated upon the Kingdom of France by Charles, the so-called dauphin of Vienne, it has been agreed that neither ourselves nor our son the King Henry nor our very dear son Philip the Duke of Burgundy will make any peace treaties with said Charles, nor will we make or have made any except with the council and agreement of all three of us and the three estates of our two Kingdoms].[75] Construing "soi-disant" as a veiled reference to Charles's uncertain paternity, historians wove the insult into the larger narrative of degraded motherhood. But "soi-disant" was a standard insult, challenging the bearer of a title's fitness for the title. Employed in letters between Charles of Orleans and John the Fearless, the insult had a long history.[76]

Conclusion

Recent criticism concerning medieval women has stressed their ability to influence indirectly. Certainly mediation was a powerful tool by which some women were

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[74] See E. Deprez, "Un essai d'union nationale à la veille du traité de Troyes (1419)," *Bibliotheque de l'Ecole des Chartes* 99 (1938): 343–53.

[75] Cited in Gibbons, "Creation of an Historical Villainess," 70.

[76] The Religieux of St. Denis uses the expression to refer to the fact that Charles VII has been disinherited; hence he is the "so-called" Dauphin. After the assassination of John the Fearless a flurry of letters spread the news of the act and interpretations of it. "Concludebatur in fine litterarum quod cum summa displicencia rex dalfini mores indisciplinatos, estoper iniquos consultores seducti, ad memoriam reducens, ipsum ab omni dignitatis titulo privandum merito decernebat, prohibens ne quis deinceps dalfinum ducem vel comitem, sed Karolum male consultum sede Francia vocantem nominaret" [It was concluded at the end of the letters that the King regarded with an intense displeasure the uncontrolled morals of the Dauphin, even though he blamed them on the advice of bad advisors, and that because of this he would deprive the Dauphin of his dignities, forbidding him any other title than Charles the Badly Advised, "so-called" of France], *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys*, vol 6, 886. On "soi-disant" as an insult see Gibbons, "Creation of an Historical Villainess," 70. See also Autrand, *Charles VI*, 588–89.

able to exercise considerable power.[77] But the very real limitations of mediation should not be ignored. Even as effective a mediator as Honor Lisle was subject to clear boundaries. As Barbara A. Hanawalt describes Honor's position as mediating wife and mother,

> Hers was a subordinate position in the male world of politics. It was her duty to be circumspect and to accept male dominance. She knew the limit of her power, and she sometimes mentioned her inferior position as a woman. Her contemporaries were concerned that her advice was so frequently forthcoming. . . .[78]

As Elisabeth Badinter notes in her study of maternal love in *ancien régime* France, "paternal power had to be maintained at all costs. Societal pressure in this direction was so great that very little else entered into it."[79]

But far from considering the limitations Isabeau's society put upon her attempts to mediate, both as Queen and mother, modern readers have condemned her for events that were beyond her capacity to correct. Throughout her maternal career, she attempted to fulfill the duties assigned her and was regularly prevented from doing so. The inevitable business of arranging marriages put her young son Charles into a household that eventually found itself on the opposing side from Isabeau in the civil war. Clearly this was not an outcome she would have wished. Indeed, the marriage was arranged in the first place to defuse some of the threat posed by John the Fearless. And yet despite the dreadful situation, Isabeau seems to have been in contact with her adolescent son only months before the Treaty of Troyes.

Isabeau's maternal love finds abundant testimony. But what can her case offer to a re-consideration of Ariès's claim that the medieval world had no concept of childhood? It is important to recognize that Ariès almost certainly would not have made the claim in the terms he used had he been steeped in the recent critical idiom that recognizes that historical examination focuses upon constructions rather than fixed cultural phenomena. Medieval childhood was nothing like its modern counterpart. Children, including Isabeau's, regularly shouldered familial responsibilities unthinkable today. Still, as Ariès undoubtedly recognized, children were not simply small adults. Their limitations were acknowledged—their childhood was seen as a period of training for what lay ahead. For example, fearing that he might die of his mental illness, Charles VI made arrangements for

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[77] See for example the collection of essays on queenship *Women and Sovereignty*, ed. Louise Olga Fradenburg.

[78] Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Lady Honor Lisle's Networks of Influence,"*Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), 188–212; here 206.

[79] Elisabeth Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct* (London: Souvenir Press, 1981), 22.

the realm to be governed in the case of his death. Because he recognized that his young son was incapable of assuming the throne, he assigned a regent, his brother Louis (and later John the Fearless), to guide the boy through his majority. Although noble children were married early to further their family's fortunes, they did not consummate their marriages before the ages of about 12 for girls and 14 for boys. Thus Isabelle, little Queen of England, remained a child although a "great lady." Grandeau notes that the girl's trousseau included dolls.[80] Before reaching majority, she would have played at being queen, learning from her entourage how to conduct herself.

As for the emotional attachment mothers experienced for the young offspring they were preparing to take on adult responsibilities, Isabeau's case demonstrates with pathetic clarity how the limitations to which she was subject as a woman shaped her maternal activity and how the opinion of modern audiences toward the Queen has been formed by a failure to give these limitations their full weight. Part of a system whose primary goal was the perpetuation of the families that controlled it, mothers were necessarily complicitous. Like Griselda, they were exhorted to obey. Like the Virgin Mary, they were required to stand by silently while their children were put into circulation. And yet Isabeau's story demonstrates that mothers might be torn apart over their required complicity. Her biography throws into relief the contradictory medieval conception of motherhood as a role that demanded a wife and mother's intervention on behalf of a masculine social system that was too flawed and too violent to survive, but that simultaneously refused to heed that intervention. Isabeau, like other women of her age, was asked to juggle paradoxical requirements. Medieval mothers, both historical and fictitious, must be considered in this context, admired when they enjoy success and regarded with compassion when they do not. Subject to powers they could not control, mediator mothers occupied a truly ambivalent role, always just on the verge of turning from an ideal into a Griselda-like villainess.

[80] Grandeau, "Les Enfants de Charles VI," 833.