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The Drowned Child: An Essay in Medieval Cultural History

There are certain topics and themes that are regularly encountered when reading the scholarship on medieval children and childhood.¹ Much attention is devoted to the very first days of life – childbirth, baptism, infanticide, abandonment.² For Southern Europe in particular, there is an interest in wet nursing.³ There is renewed attention – for the later Middle Ages at least – once children start to receive formal education or leave home to go into service or take up apprenticeships.⁴ Conduct literature, which seems particularly to have proliferated after the Black Death, is also regularly drawn upon to provide a window onto the sociali-

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- 1 I would like to thank Prof. Claudia Jarzebowski for asking me to contribute to this collection and for inviting me to Berlin. My thanks go also to Dr Sethina Watson for reading and commenting on a version of this essay.

The literature on childhood in the Middle Ages continues to grow, though much is predicated on the relationship between parents and children, the legacy of the seminal monograph by Philippe Ariès. This for example is the driving concern in Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, London 1990. There has been less concern with understanding the experience of childhood from a child's perspective, though this is the ostensible intention of Barbara A. Hanawalt's *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History*, New York 1993. Other recent works worth noting include Danièle Alexandre-Bidon/Didier Lett, *Les Enfants au Moyen Age, Ve–XV^e siècles*, Paris 1997; Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children*, New Haven 2003; Albrecht Classen (ed.), *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, Berlin 2005. For a useful bibliography, which includes article literature, see William F. MacLehose, *A Tender Age: Cultural Anxieties over the Child in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, New York 2008, pp. 222–225.

- 2 See e.g. Peter Biller, *Childbirth in the Middle Ages*, in: *History Today* 36 (1986) 8, pp. 42–49; Becky R. Lee, *A Company of Men and Women: Men's Recollection of Childbirth in Medieval England*, in: *Journal of Family History* 27 (2002), pp. 92–100; Louis Haas, *The Renaissance Man and his Children: childbirth and early childhood in Florence, 1300–1600*, New York 1998; Kathryn A. Taglia, *The cultural construction of childhood: baptism, communion, and confirmation*, in: Constance M. Rousseau/Joel T. Rosenthal (eds.), *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom*, Kalamazoo, MI 1998, pp. 255–288; Richard H. Helmholtz, *Infanticide in the Province of Canterbury During the Fifteenth Century*, in: *History of Childhood Quarterly* 2 (1975), pp. 379–390; Sara M. Butler, *A Case of Indifference?: Child Murder in Later Medieval England*, in: *Journal of Women's History* 19 (2007) 4, pp. 59–82.
- 3 See e.g. Leah Lydia Otis, *Municipal wet nurses in fifteenth-century Montpellier*, in: Barbara A. Hanawalt (ed.), *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, Bloomington 1986, pp. 83–93; Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Blood Parents and Milk Parents: Wet Nursing in Florence, 1300–1530*, in: eadem, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane, Chicago 1985, pp. 132–164.
- 4 See e.g. Caroline Barron, *The Education of Girls in Medieval London*, in: Diana E. S. Dunn (ed.), *Courts, Counties and the Capital in the Later Middle Ages*, Stroud 1996, pp. 139–153; Stanley Chojnacki, *Measuring Adulthood: Adolescence and Gender in Renaissance Venice*, in: *Journal of Family History* 17 (1992) 4, pp. 371–395; Jeremy P. Goldberg, *Masters and Men in Later Medieval England*, in: Dawn Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, London 1999, pp. 56–70.

sation of children and – as is often the case – adolescents.⁵ The years between early infancy and puberty are, in contrast, not so well served and the prevailing leitmotif is a history of the unfortunate and the accident-prone. Barbara Hanawalt's brilliant pioneering study of childhood from the evidence of fatal accidents drawing upon coroners' rolls remains highly influential, but others have pursued the same theme using miracle narratives instead, not least for the English Middle Ages in a monograph study by Ronald Finucane and an article by Eleanor Gordon.⁶ This present article is prompted by such a literature in which reports of child drownings and the miraculous restoration to life of child victims of drownings feature prominently. My concern is to question the rather unproblematised readings of such cases as social historical evidence for childhood and parent-child relations by exploring the cultural context within which such material was created. In particular I wish to explore the possible resonances with two other culturally-specific contexts involving bodies of water, namely baptism, a sacrament of the Church, and the judicial ordeal of cold water used in English criminal cases prior to its abolition by the Lateran Council of 1215.

The topics that historians write about are, of course, determined in part by the nature of the extant evidence. Scholars researching childhood in the Middle Ages are not exactly overburdened by documentary sources, hence the importance of the records of the coroners' courts and miracula, accounts of miracles performed by a saint. Neither specifically relates to children, but for England, the focus of this present study, numbers of coroners' cases of suspected violent or accidental death of children survive from the later thirteenth century and fourteenth centuries. Miracle collections survive from a somewhat earlier era, but some high and later medieval collections also survive. Again, numbers of miracle accounts relate to children. That these two sources may be fruitfully juxtaposed has already been appreciated by Hanawalt.⁷ To date, however, researchers on medieval childhood have used these two sources primarily as social rather than cultural documents. In focusing, in particular, on narratives relating to child drownings or near drownings – miracle accounts describe children who were drowned but were subsequently restored to life, a phenomenon recognised today as near drowning, I have used miracles from the proceedings for the canonisation of Thomas Cantelupe, bishop of Hereford and, in particular, the miracle collections of William of Canterbury and Benedict of Peterborough in respect of St Thomas Becket, the martyred

- 5 Kathleen Ashley/Robert L. A. Clark (eds.), *Medieval Conduct*, Minneapolis 2001; Felicity Riddy, *Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text*, in: *Speculum* 71 (1996) 1, pp. 68–86.
- 6 Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Childrearing Among the Lower Classes of Late Medieval England*, in: *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (1977), pp. 1–22; Ronald C. Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles*, New York 1997; Eleanor C. Gordon, *Child Health in the Middle Ages as Seen in the Miracles of Five English Saints, A. D. 1150–1220*, in: *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 60 (1986), pp. 502–522. See also Didier Lett, *Les lieux périlleux de l'enfance d'après quelques récits de miracles des XIIe-XIIIe siècles*, in: *Médiévales* 34 (1998), pp. 113–125. I have revisited the use of coroners' rolls in relation to the study of medieval children in Jeremy P. Goldberg, *Childhood and gender in later medieval England*, in: *Viator* 39 (2008), pp. 249–262.
- 7 Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Narratives of a Nurturing Culture: Parents and Neighbours in Medieval England*, in: *Essays in Medieval Studies* 12 (1995) published electronically at <http://www.illinoismedieval.org/ems/VOL12/hanawalt.html> (27.9.2013); reprinted in Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Of Good and Ill Repute: Gender and Social Control in Medieval England*, New York 1999, pp. 158–177.

archbishop of Canterbury.⁸ I have used coroners' court records from published sources, viz. Reginald Sharpe's calendar of earlier fourteenth-century London cases and, more especially, Charles Gross' edition for the Selden Society.⁹

Both coroners' rolls and miracle collections may concern the death of a child, but the rationale that determines, on the one hand, the verdict delivered by the coroner's jury and, on the other, the form of the miracle story is essentially unlike. The coroner's jury ostensibly tells the truth of what happened – the English ›verdict‹ derives from the Latin *veredicere*, to speak truthfully – but it is always a convenient truth, one that lays or deflects blame, implicates or exonerates. Thus when in 1371 the jurors of Maldon, Essex were asked to explain the death of Alice Cherles, a woman whose body was found in a public place apparently displaying serious head wounds – the verdict explains that she was hit on the head by ›great tiles [bricks] and sea coal‹ – they chose to implicate ›one Katherine Ronges [...] unsound of mind‹. The finding of a body in the open necessarily required the community to act; word of such a find would quickly spread – hence the death could not readily be concealed – and the crown required that all deaths that were thought to be the product of accident or violence be reported to and investigated by the coroner.¹⁰ Katherine possessed two advantages. First, by blaming a woman reputed to be ›non compos mentis‹, the jury were exonerated from having to explain why Alice was fatally attacked by a stranger for no apparent motive – the jurors gave no hint of robbery, personal animosity, or sexual assault, but these all form common enough elements of other verdicts. Second, by blaming Katherine, the jury implicated an outsider from Messing, several miles distant and hence deflected suspicion from someone, known or unknown, within their own community. Third, by blaming a woman not in possession of her mental faculties, they blamed someone who would not suffer the full force of the law – death by hanging – because she could not be held responsible for her actions.¹¹ It follows that we can be moderately confident that Alice was indeed done to death and was not the victim of a terrible accident, but we can go little further. The jury may have blamed Katherine Ronges of Messing because this simultaneously ›explained‹ the death and deflected

8 *Acta Sanctorum*, October, vol. 1 (Cantelupe); Edwin A. Abbott (ed. and trans.), *St. Thomas of Canterbury, his Death and Miracles*, 2 vols., London 1898. There is almost no scholarly literature specifically focused on drowning or near drowning in a medieval context, but a study that considers the theme in a range of literary texts is Jean-Marc Pastré, *De l'origine et de quelques aspects de la noyade au Moyen Age*, in: Danièle James-Raoul/Claude Thomasset (eds.), *Dans l'Eau, Sous l'Eau: le Monde Aquatique au Moyen Age*, Paris 2002, pp. 375–86. Also of interest is Nicholas Orme, *Early British Swimming, 55 BC–AD 1719*, Exeter 1983. He argues (ch. 2) that though there was knowledge of swimming in the medieval era, it was perhaps not widely learnt or practised and only among males.

9 Reginald R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of Coroners' Rolls of the City of London 1300–1376*, London 1913; Charles Gross (ed.), *Select Cases from the Coroners' Rolls A. D. 1265–1413*. With a brief account of the history of the office of coroner, London 1896.

10 It is worth noticing in this context the most unusual verdict offered by a Bedfordshire jury in 1271 in respect of a dead body found in a ditch. The jurors reported that ›they know nothing about the slain man, nor do they know when or where he was killed, nor whence he came, but they know well that he was not killed there, nor can they find or obtain knowledge of any tracks made by him coming there‹. The finding of such a body could hardly be kept quiet, but the jury could at least make a case that neither the body nor the death could be associated with their own locality: Gross, *Select Cases*, pp. xxiv, 30.

11 The crown could, however, decide that a mad person who had been tried on a felony charge be held in prison: Nigel Walker, *Crime and Insanity in England*, Vol. 1, Edinburgh 1968, pp. 18–30.

attention from within Maldon, not because the jurors necessarily believed or had reason to believe Katherine's guilt.¹²

The verdict of the twelve good men was given final shape as a written text by the coroner's Latin-literate clerk who enters it into the official record. This process of translation probably served to ensure that the records achieved greater uniformity in language and form and projected a clearer sense that the proper processes had been followed than might otherwise have been the case. Thus the record of the Alice Cherles' case is careful to name the 'first finder' – the person who supposedly discovered the body – the four 'nearest neighbours', who happen, of course, all to be men, and to who the first finder dutifully announces his grim discovery. It goes on to detail how the neighbours alerted the king's bailiff, the bailiff notified one of the county coroners, and the county coroner came, was shown the body by the first finder, viewed and felt it, and empanelled a jury. The official record thus shows that the proper procedures were followed with such well drilled regularity that one might suppose that such proceedings were an everyday occurrence rather than a once in a lifetime event. One might suspect also that the jurors' account of events was rather fuller and more discursive than the succinct summary that enters the record.¹³ Further legal process may follow, as when the jurors tell of homicide and lay the blame on a named individual, but the coroner's work is essentially done once the verdict is gathered in.

The miracle story seeks a different kind of truth and, in so doing, is no more concerned with a forensic 'truth' than the verdict of a coroner's jury. The miracle story's purpose is to demonstrate the power of the saint.¹⁴ The bringing back to life of child that had died or the protection of a child from otherwise certain death through the saint's intercession serves as particularly powerful testimony to saintliness. The miracle is in the first place usually reported by laymen and women, but the record is necessarily kept and so shaped by Latin-literate clerks employed in the service of the Church. The words of the laity who testify to the miracle are thus ventriloquised by the clerk and in the process reshaped in ways that best suit the promotion of the saint's cult. In fact we should distinguish between miracle narratives collected at the shrine and used in effect as testimonials to a saint's efficacy and actual depositions collected as part of the process of canonisation. The former provide much more scope for reworking and reordering than would be true of testimony given as part of the canonisation process, though the witnesses so testifying would be aware of and complicit in the process designed to prove the credentials of a person already revered locally as a saint. Indeed, the

12 Gross, *Select Cases*, pp. 46–47.

13 Some extant verdicts indicate that the jury responded to a series of questions posed by the coroner. Thus in a Middlesex homicide verdict from 1366, the jurors were asked variously where the culprit went, who was present at the time, and what goods and chattels the culprit possessed: Gross, *Select Cases*, pp. 52–53. It follows that the narrative may in effect be shaped in part by questions posed by the coroner, who would have much greater experience of the pertinent legal requirements. He would be aware, for example, of the necessity to ask about the first finder or to evaluate, in the case of accidents, the deodand (the instrument that caused a death, the value of which was confiscated by the crown) or, in the case of homicides, the value of the felon's possessions which would subsequently become the property of the crown. It follows that we should perhaps see the verdict as a collaborative text in which the coroner, the jurors and the clerk all played a part.

14 A useful recent discussion of miracles in medieval culture is Michael Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders: The Development of the Concept of Miracle, 1150–1350*, Aldershot 2007.

desired outcome – proof of another miracle necessary in the process of canonisation established during the thirteenth century – would have shaped individual witnesses' responses.¹⁵

A narrative of the miraculous preservation of an infant in his cradle from certain death found in collections from the 1170s relating to Thomas Becker illustrates well the sort of account collected at a shrine. It related how Geoffrey, a boy of some sixteen or eighteen months – the two overlapping narratives differ in detail – was saved from a fever by water of St Thomas, that is water supposedly containing a trace of the martyr's blood. This preamble establishes the parent's faith in the saint's healing powers and the saint's protection of the vulnerable little boy. Sometime later the child was sleeping in his cradle with his mother Leticia sat nearby. Suddenly a substantial stone partition wall collapsed entirely burying the child. His distraught mother cried out to the saint who had so recently saved her son and then fainted. The household servants entered the room and revived Leticia with cold water, but only once recovered was she able to draw attention to the fact that her son lay buried and presumed dead under a great weight of collapsed wall. Help is enlisted and numbers of men tear at the stone finding in time the cradle shattered into eighteen pieces. The little boy, however, is found unscathed and laughing. One narrative goes on to explain that the child subsequently became ill because his parents had failed to repay the saint with due thanks, but on advice they took child from their home in Winchester to the saint's shrine at Canterbury and so related the miracle.¹⁶

The leitmotif of the accounts is that the saint is powerful. A high wall collapses and three or four cartloads of stone and rubble engulf the small child in his cradle. The cradle, though made of solid boards, is shattered into many pieces, some splinters of which are driven deep into the ground by the force of the falling stones. The little child, lying quietly in his cradle at the time the wall failed, is found alive, unscathed, laughing. The fragility of the child, and hence the wonder of the miracle, is accentuated by the emphasis on the height and weight of the wall that collapses and the solidity and subsequent disintegration of the cradle in which the child lay. That it is the saint and not some happy chance that spares the child is made clearest in the fullest of the two accounts, that by William of Canterbury, which bookends the narrative with evidence of the saint's particular interest in the toddler. First, the saint restores the feverish child to health by bringing down his temperature when his worried parents apply St Thomas' water. At the end of the narrative, we learn that the child once again begins to sicken, at which point a woman comes to the boy's grandmother and tells her of a revelation she has had. The saint is apparently displeased that the parents have failed to render due thanks for his intercession and they must go to Canterbury to do him honour. At the heart of the narrative is the drama of the sudden collapse of the wall followed almost immediately by the collapse of his distraught mother, but before she faints she has the presence of mind to invoke the saint's help. Implicitly it is this invocation at a time of urgent need that ensures the saint's protection for the little boy.

The essential point remains. The verdict of the coroner's jury and the miracle narrative may both concern fatal or at least life-threatening accidents to a child, albeit a child that

15 Margaret Toynbee, *St Louis of Toulouse and the Process of Canonisation in the Fourteenth Century*, Manchester 1929, pp. 133–205; André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell, Cambridge 1997, ch. 3; Patrick H. Daly, *The Process of Canonization in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries*, in: Meryl Jancey (ed.), *St Thomas Cantilupe, Bishop of Hereford: Essays in his Honour*, Hereford 1982, pp. 125–135.

16 Abbott, *St Thomas of Canterbury*, 2, pp. 190–196.

may then be saved or revived by the intercession of a saint in one set of narratives and a child that is killed and remains resolutely dead in another, yet the child is not their primary concern. For us as modern scholars to so use them as sources for the history of childhood is consequently problematic. Likewise, in both instances we are removed at a distance from actual experience or actual words of testimony through the clerical processes of translation from vernacular to Latin and of editing. To ask such historical questions as ›what actually happened?‹ is consequently both to enquire of something we cannot in fact recover and to overlook other, perhaps more rewarding questions. It is, however, very hard for the historian not to ask ›what actually happened‹ and very tempting to engage in an essentially fictive process of retrospective detective work. Indeed, in numbers of instances the relationship between ›what actually happened‹, though in itself not actually knowable, and what the record narrates is probably close. Thus the numerous verdicts of coroners' juries to the effect that a young child went outside to play, fell into a ditch or well, and so drowned probably reflect that such accidents happened periodically. Thus, for example, the drowning in 1267 of Alice, the little daughter – she is described as ›nearly two‹ – of Henry Wigan of Goldington (Bedfordshire county) who went from her father's property (›curia‹) and tumbled down the well on the green may be as an accurate a summary of the little girl's last moments and demise as might today be provided with the aid of forensic evidence, CCTV footage, and the professional questioning of all who might have connection with the case.¹⁷

Alice was found by her mother Agnes. The implication is that it was her mother who searched for her missing child and her mother who thought to look in the well. This may indeed be so, but the information that the mother found her is prompted by the diplomatic of the coroners' rolls. The so-called ›first finder‹ is routinely recorded and implicitly – perhaps explicitly – demanded by the court.¹⁸ It may be that here and in numbers of other cases involving young children, it was mothers who routinely searched for a missing child since small children were culturally understood to be their especial concern.¹⁹ But in recording that it was Agnes who discovered her drowned daughter, the clerk is tacitly acknowledging that the mother did indeed follow cultural expectation and search for her daughter and even that by finding her daughter down the well, Agnes showed herself a caring mother. In like manner, but more explicitly, little Geoffrey's mother Leticia is described as dutifully sitting alone watching over her son as he lay in his cradle. The laconic narrative of the coroners' record does not, however, tell how the mother shouted for her daughter, running frantically hither and thither and asking all she passed if they had seen her little girl. Unlike the narrative of Leticia distraught for her child buried under a heap of rubble, we are spared the tears and wailing of the overwrought mother which add dramatic force to the narrative and draw the reader or hearer in to empathise with her fear and so marvel all the more at the miracle which follows. There is no record of how Alice's lifeless body was recovered from the well, whereas the work to recover little Geoffrey from the rubble is fully narrated since it serves to emphasise how completely the child was covered and the extreme weight of the stones that fell, hence reinforcing that the child's survival was miraculous rather than fortuitous. We can of course imagine Agnes' distress; as the father of a daughter who caused the odd anxious moment when very little, it is perhaps too easy for me to fill these gaps. Such details are left

17 Gross, *Select Cases*, p. 7.

18 This is one of the questions routinely asked of the jury by the coroner in Middlesex cases from the 1360s: Gross, *Select Cases*, pp. 52–53, 55.

19 Goldberg, *Childhood and gender*, p. 258.

from the coroner's jury's verdict because such emotions were immaterial to the primary task of the jurors, which was simply to determine whether a death was an accident, a homicide, or the product of natural causes. The larger point is that such verdicts and miracle stories alike are essentially fictive creations and that there is an agenda behind their construction.

Only a few miles away and the same year as little Alice drowned, William, a boy aged three and a half, son of William Fraunceys, was found by a coroner's jury to have drowned in a neighbour's ditch. The verdict here is only very slightly more informative. The boy's mother, we are told, was visiting the neighbour to purchase ale – the staple drink in peasant society and thus a necessity rather than evidence of the mother's impropriety – when the child fell in the ditch. We may suppose the little boy had either accompanied his mother or else followed her, but we are not told. What we do learn is that his mother first found him (*invenit eum primo*) and lifted him from the water and tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to save him (*levavit eum de aqua et putabat salvare eum*).²⁰ This last serves more explicitly to demonstrate the mother's concern for the child, the implication being that she was to carry no blame for his death, but may in any case be included because the child was not actually dead when first discovered.

Miracle narratives need not be any more informative. Indeed, because they follow a rather different diplomatic, some details may go unnoticed. Of the drownings of John, son of Gilbert of Croydon (Cambridgeshire) and John, son of Hugh London of Radnage (Buckinghamshire), recorded in the same entry among the miracles attributed to the soon-to-be canonised Thomas Cantelupe, neither the ages of the children nor the identity of a first finder are recorded. The more important information recorded here is that both children were measured so that a wax taper of like length could be given in the name of St Thomas in the hope of the saint's intercession. The hagiographical text is concerned here both to demonstrate the extent of the cult – the saint is being appealed to far beyond the diocese of Hereford – and to establish that the miraculous return to life of the drowned boys was a response to a specific appeal to the saint. A little more informative is the third such restoration of a drowned child contained in the same entry. Florence, the daughter of John Austin of Cottenham, also in Cambridgeshire, is said to have fallen into a well and remained there, lying in the water. Another child – *quidam alius puer*, so apparently a boy – ran from the well to the girl's parents' house. Her father then ran to the well, lifted her out and laid her upon the ground. For half an hour she lay there dead, but *they* then vowed to God and St Thomas and immediately she revived. The *they* is unspecified, but we suppose that by this stage the father had been joined by other kin and neighbours.²¹

There are no doubt questions to be asked about how the cult came to spread as far as this evidence would suggest. That St Thomas Cantelupe was deemed especially efficacious in respect of drowned children is apparent from the frequency with which such miracles are recorded.²² For the social historian, however, this narrative is by far the most interesting of the

20 Gross, *Select Cases*, p. 8.

21 *Acta Sanctorum*, October, vol. 1 (Cantelupe), p. 618.

22 In fact Thomas Cantelupe is not especially remarkable in this respect. Of the six saints analysed by Eleanora Gordon, Edmund, Wulfstan and (for a rather later era) Henry VI are all associated with rather higher proportions of miracles involving children, and Thomas Becket only slightly lower. Simon de Montfort alone showed a significantly lower proportion. Although Gordon only analyses miracles involving children by type and not by saint, given that, as we shall shortly see, significantly over half were drowning-related, it is reasonable to assume that no saint was espe-

three since it implies that the two children were probably playing together by the well when the one fell in and the other ran for help. It also evidences boys and girls playing together. This mirrors the evidence of verdicts in coroners' courts which on numbers of occasions describe children playing together, though more often children of the same sex, particularly in relation to children slightly older than the toddlers our examples have thus far referenced. (Florence's age is not noticed, though she is described simply as 'filia' unqualified by the epithet 'parvula'.) Thus, to give one example, Robert Mulward was accidentally crushed by a cart when playing with some other boys (or children) in his father's garden.²³ It matters not what may or may have been the actual circumstances that lie behind the narratives of the coroner's jury or the miracle story. They clearly draw upon and mirror circumstances from everyday life and as such constitute useful social documents and rare windows into the experience of childhood.

It is as cultural as much as social documents that I now wish to interrogate verdicts in coroners' courts and miracle narratives. In particular I want to consider the possible meanings of the numerous incidences of drowning recounted in both types of source. Ronald Finucane analysed a sample of 156 accidents described in miracle stories and found 'drownings constituted most reported children's accidents'.²⁴ Eleanor Gordon's analysis of a similar and only slightly smaller sample of 135 cases is more precise: 76 or well over half (56.3 per cent) concern drowning.²⁵ Finucane goes on to offer a number of illustrations of the point by recounting a number of miracle narratives, mostly from the canonisation proceedings for St Thomas Cantilupe cited here, but he offers little by way of analysis. His retelling of the miracle stories and the limited discussion that he offers seems strongly to suggest he took the accounts pretty much at face value. One of his few comments is to cite Barbara Hanawalt's observation that wells were 'treacherous' and how a child – or indeed an adult made unsteady 'by the weight of a filled pitcher or bucket' – might easily fall in because 'the ground around the well would be muddy and slippery'.²⁶ Hanawalt has herself discussed the frequency with which deaths by drowning appear in the records of the coroners' courts. In her sample of over a thousand cases relating to adults, she found 'drowning accounted for 34 percent of all accidental deaths'. However, though her analysis extended to child accidents and she cites a number of examples of children drowning, her statistical tables do not allow us to calculate the equivalent proportion of child deaths that were attributed to drowning by coroners' juries.²⁷ My own sampling of cases suggests drowning was the most common

cially associated with reviving drowned children: Gordon, *Accidents among Medieval Children*, tables 1 and 2, pp. 148 and 150.

23 Goldberg, *Childhood and gender*, pp. 258–259.

24 Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents*, p. 103.

25 Gordon, *Accidents among Medieval Children*, table 2, p. 150.

26 Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents*, p. 103 citing Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England*, New York 1986, p. 41. It is worth noticing here that a study of drownings of children aged between one and four years in metropolitan Guadalajara (Mexico) in the early 1990s suggested that houses with wells were seven times riskier than those without: Alfredo Celis, *Home drowning among preschool age Mexican Children*, in: *Injury Prevention* 3 (1997), pp. 252–256.

27 Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, p. 27. Unfortunately Hanawalt's statistical appendix groups deaths under various heads including 'home' and 'bodies of water' where the head 'home' apparently includes the area adjacent to the home and, for analytical purposes, wells are counted as adjacent to the home. For a critique of Hanawalt's use of statistics, see Jeremy Goldberg, *The*

explanation for child fatalities reported to the coroner. Of a chronologically rather diverse sample of 118 cases concerning children and adolescents, nine were presented as homicides. Of the remaining 109 returned as accidents, 54 or about half (49.5 per cent) were explained as the result of drowning. Of these, 24 were girls and 30 boys, but this statistic is skewed by the disproportionately large number of drownings of boys found in the later thirteenth-century Bedfordshire rolls which form the earliest part of my sample.²⁸

It follows that the coroners' rolls tell us only the propensity of local communities and coroners' juries to report drownings of boys and girls and not the propensity of boys and girls to drown. Indeed, by analogy with modern childhood accident statistics, in sex-specific terms the proportion of drownings associated with boys in the sample of coroners' cases seems remarkably low or, conversely, the proportion of drownings associated with girls seems remarkably high. A study of 140 fatal and near-fatal drownings of children in the city and county of Honolulu (Hawaii) in the mid 1970s found that, with the one worrying exception of babies under one actually drowning in fresh water, boys were consistently much more prone than girls to suffer drowning or near-drowning accidents.²⁹ Likewise, by comparison to modern statistical evidence, the proportion of drownings compared to other types of accidents resulting in childhood fatalities seems extraordinarily high.³⁰ Even in Brazil in the 1970s, to use an example of a developing rather than a developed society, accidental childhood deaths due to drowning accounted for only 34.8 per cent of all childhood accidents other than road accidents.³¹ A yet more pertinent analogy is rural Iran using data collected for 1993–4. This suggests drownings accounted for only some 28.6 per cent of all fatal childhood accidents less road accidents.³² It should be noted, moreover, that road acci-

Public and the Private: Women in the Pre-Plague Economy, in: P.R. Coss/S.D. Lloyd (eds.), *Thirteenth Century England: Proceedings of the Newcastle-upon-Tyne conference 1989*, Vol. 3, Woodbridge 1991, pp. 75–89.

28 Goldberg, *Childhood and gender*, pp. 256–257.

29 John H. Pearn et al., *Drowning and Near-Drowning Involving Children: A Five-year Total Population Study from the City and County of Honolulu*, in: *American Journal of Public Health* 6 (1979), pp. 450–455, esp. table 2, p. 452. The 'accidental' drownings of very young children sometimes conceal infanticide, cf. A. M. Kemp/A. M. Mott/J. R. Sibert, *Accidents and child abuse in bathtub submersions*, in: *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 70 (1994), pp. 435–438.

30 In England and Wales in 1992 only 8.4 per cent of childhood fatal accidents were associated with drowning. If road accidents are removed from the equation, this proportion still only rises to less than one in five of all fatal accidents. Very similar findings apply to a much smaller sample from North Staffordshire in the 1980s: A. M. Kemp/J. R. Sibert, *Childhood accidents: epidemiology, trends, and prevention*, in: *Journal of Accident and Emergency Medicine* 14 (1997), pp. 316–320; M. J. Bannon et al., *Causes of fatal childhood accidents in North Staffordshire, 1980–1989*, in: *Archives of Emergency Medicine* 9 (1992), pp. 357–366.

31 Again, drownings of boys consistently outnumbered drownings of girls in all age groups. It should be noted, however, that a large number of deaths were due to unspecified causes. The study also found a number of deaths, though only a very small proportion of all accidental deaths, were caused by falling down wells; these are apparently counted separately from drowning: Maria Helena de Mello Jorge/Marilia Bernardes Marques, *Violent Childhood Deaths in Brazil*, in: *Bulletin of the Pan-American Health Organisation* 19 (1985), table 4, p. 291, table 9, p. 294.

32 Hamid Soori/Mohsen Naghavi, *Childhood deaths from unintentional injuries in rural areas of Iran*, in: *Injury Prevention* 4 (1998), table 3, p. 223. Here too numbers of drownings of males exceeded those of females for children over the age of one, but most markedly for children in the age group 5–14 years (85 and 32 deaths respectively). However, for infants aged less than

dents – children struck by horses hooves or run over by carts – do in fact account for numbers of reported fatalities in both coroners' rolls and miracle narratives, so by excluding all road traffic accidents we artificially inflate the proportion of deaths attributed to drowning.

Despite the caveats raised by comparisons with modern societies, it would be easy and indeed justifiable to conclude that deaths (or near deaths) by drowning were a comparatively common childhood accident. Gordon indeed notes, as if a given, that 'water was by far the most common hazard for medieval children. It is not surprising, therefore, that the miracle narratives contain many accounts of near-drownings.'³³ Probably drownings were comparatively numerous, but we are in no position to generate any kind of meaningful measure of risk by comparing numbers of reported accidents to the population of children in any given region or at any given period of time. All we can say with confidence is that deaths or supposedly miraculous recoveries from death by drowning form a substantial proportion of all fatal or nearly fatal accidents recorded both in verdicts from coroners' cases or in miracle narratives. That the proportions from our two samples are of a broadly similar magnitude – 49.5 per cent and 56.3 per cent respectively – might well encourage the conclusion that indeed about half of all fatal or nearly fatal accidents involving children were caused by falling into wells, ditches, streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, and large vessels of water and so drowning or apparently drowning. This may indeed have been the case, but as just remarked, such a high proportion of deaths by drowning is suspiciously out of line with modern data even from developing countries, including rural Iran. The similarities in the proportions derived from the two sources are in fact entirely coincidental and any sense that their congruity lends them credence is spurious. In fact there is good reason why drownings are over-represented in both types of material.

As is shown by our earlier discussion of little Geoffrey, saved by the intervention of Thomas Becket from certain death by crushing, miracle narratives served to promote the cult of the saint. Little Geoffrey was spared not because numbers of men furiously clawed at the heap of fallen stones and rubble, nor because the little boy was protected by his sturdy wooden cradle, which we are pointedly told in fact shattered into eighteen pieces. Rather he was saved because his mother had the wits to invoke the saint before her distress overwhelmed her and she fainted; she placed divine agency above human at a moment of extreme crisis – and of course by fainting she delayed the process of retrieving the child from under the collapsed wall making the child's survival all the more miraculous. The use of a miracle story in a collection compiled at the shrine – the longer version of the story of little Geoffrey concluded with the account of how the little boy's parents came 'to Canterbury and told us what we tell [*didicimus quae dicimus*]' – or in material gathered against the process of canonisation was determined both by the availability of a narrative and by its perceived suitability for selection. We must assume that some, perhaps many narratives were in effect rejected.³⁴

one year, there were sixteen recorded drowning of girl babies as against only seven boy babies, a pattern that the present author would interpret as evidence of female neglect or even disguised infanticide.

33 Gordon, *Accidents among Medieval Children*, p. 151. As was noted earlier (n. 26) a study of drownings of children aged between one and four years in metropolitan Guadalajara (Mexico) in the early 1990s suggested that houses with wells were seven times riskier than those without: Celis, *Home drowning*, pp. 252–256.

34 This is implicit in the sense that the recording of miracula depended on the collector, cf. Rachel Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in the High Middle Ages*, Philadelphia 2011, p. 45.

Clearly the great number of drownings or – as a modern sceptical audience would understand it – near drownings must in part reflect the ready availability of such narratives and hence the comparative frequency with which youngsters suffered near fatal accidents through drowning. Unlike the cases narrated in the verdicts of coroners' juries, however, the miracle narrative depended not just on a nearly fatal accident. They depend also on the child surviving and recovering from the near fatal experience, which, but for the saint's intervention would have resulted in actual fatality. To state the obvious, the miracle collections do not include narratives that ended in the child's death – and implicitly the failure of any saint to intervene. The logical corollary is that collections will necessarily under-represent those kinds of childhood accidents that regularly proved fatal, were very rarely survived, and from which full recovery was quite exceptional. Fatalities attributed to house fires or infants falling into fires feature quite often in coroners' records. Thus, for example, two little sisters were said to have been at home whilst their parents William Blaunche and his wife were working in the fields. Muriel, the six-year-old, escaped, but Beatrice, her three-year-old sister died.³⁵ One-year-old Agnes Thorneborgh accidentally fell into the fire in her father's house and so was burnt to death.³⁶ Recovery from burns, however, accounted for only two of Gordon's sample of 135 childhood accidents found in six English miracle collections.³⁷ There are no examples of children dying in fires who are then miraculously restored to life.

Recovery from supposed death by drowning, i.e. near drowning, is a surprisingly common occurrence. As a study of 306 child drownings and near drownings in the United Kingdom in 1988–9 shows, surviving near drowning is actually slightly more common than actual fatality due to drowning and in some instances markedly so. Of 59 drowning-related incidents in garden ponds, primarily involving toddlers, 48 survived.³⁸ The story for house fires is in some ways very different. Here inhalation of toxic fumes, heat shock and smoke inhalation may be surer and quicker causes of fatality than actual burning. Similarly a small child falling in a fire is liable to suffer extensive and possibly deep burns, again resulting in likely death. It would follow that the numbers of supposedly miraculous recoveries from drowning would significantly outnumber, because so much more likely, recovery from trauma sustained in house fires or from severe burns. In fact this is too easy an answer. We tend to know about the periodic destruction of large parts of urban communities such as the London fire of 1212, the Doncaster fire of 1204 or the Rochester fire of 1177, but fire was an ever present hazard as the fatal house fires periodically noticed in the coroners' rolls demonstrate. The coroners' rolls of course alert us only to fires resulting in fatalities, but as the same source also shows, people regularly escaped house fires. For example, in 1322 the parents of two sons escaped a London house fire that killed their children as did the older of the two

35 Gross, *Select Cases*, p. 6.

36 Lesley Boatwright (ed.), *Inquests and Indictments from late Fourteenth Century Buckinghamshire*, Chippenham 1994, no. 55, pp. 32–33.

37 Gordon, *Accidents among Medieval Children*, p. 156. She in fact described three cases under the heading 'burns', but one was of a boy scalded by a boiling pan of beans and hence not an injury caused by fire as such. Gordon also remarks the likely incidence of burns and observes that 'it is quite likely that survival from severe burns was the exception'.

38 Four of the survivors, however, were left brain damaged. The proportion of fatalities in respect of rivers, canals and lakes was significantly greater with less than one in four surviving. Here the mean age of victims was nearly seven: A. M. Kemp/J. R. Sibert, *Drowning and near drowning in children in the United Kingdom: lessons for prevention*, in: *British Medical Journal* 304 (1992), pp. 1143–1146, esp. table, p. 1144.

little girls noted a little earlier.³⁹ Similarly although children suffering major burns had little prospect of recovery, lesser burns must have been common in a culture of open hearths and candles. The paucity of children who had survived fires appearing in miracle narratives cannot therefore be because the experience of surviving a house fire or burns was rare.

The recording of narratives is, as already noted, not simply a product or reflection of the potential availability of such narratives. There were people who came to give thanks to a saint for preservation from fire or, as Gordon's two cases show, for recovery from burns. The miracles of Thomas Becket, for example, include a narrative of how an unnamed pilgrim, who had been turned away from other houses, saved his host's home from the fire that destroyed Rochester in 1177 by leaping on the roof with a phial of the Water.⁴⁰ This narrative is not, however, about giving thanks to the saint for sparing or restoring a life or lives through his intercession with the Divinity. The miracle is rooted in an historical event, but one of the key players goes curiously unnamed and the saint's intercession is to preserve the property and so also the livelihood of the baker who gives shelter to the pilgrim. The real force of the miracle is to demonstrate how righteousness will be rewarded and sin punished – the baker who alone gave shelter to the pilgrim has his property spared when all else is consumed in the flames. It is, moreover, to demonstrate the power of the saint; a mere phial of water containing but a tiny trace of the martyr's blood holds the flames at bay. More pedestrian accounts no doubt were proffered by devout men and women giving thanks to the saint for sparing their lives when their houses caught fire, but – other than in the heart of the devotee – what was there to show that the saint had indeed interceded? What was there that demonstrated the power of the saint when house fires were common, but fatalities comparatively rare?⁴¹

Much the same argument may be made in respect of burns. Though it is perfectly possible to survive burns if not too extensive or deep, all but the most trivial heal only slowly, leaving the victim with conspicuous scarring, skin discolouration and even deformation. To show complete healing from a minor burn or to show heavy scarring and deformities was no advertisement of the power of the saint, however thankful the victim might feel. Such narratives, if offered, would scarcely have merited recording. Survivors of drownings, however, were ideal advertisements of the power of the saint. The drowning narrative comprised three key elements, viz. i) the actual drowning – or near drowning as we would understand it, ii) the appeal to the saint, and iii) the subsequent restoration to life. Recovery was never immediate. There was always an interval of time between the supposed drowning and the first signs of life and perhaps a still longer interval before the victim was recovered more fully. These intervals provided a narrative space in which a variety of actors might invoke the help of the saint, but the interval between drowning and first signs of life in essence reinforced the perception that the victim had indeed died and hence also the perception of the powerfulness of the saint.

An example will illustrate the broader pattern. Two parallel accounts of the drowning and restoration to life of Philip, the eight-year-old son of one Hugh Scot through the intercession

39 Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of Coroners' Rolls*, p. 41.

40 The actual date of the fire is not included in the miracle narrative, but we know from other sources that Rochester suffered a devastating fire that year: Abbott, *St Thomas of Canterbury*, 1, p. 309; Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, p. 278.

41 Only five people are recorded to have died in the Great Fire of London (1666), which destroyed a large part of the medieval city. Rachel Koopmans has made a similar point regarding the abrupt reversal from drowned to miraculously restored which is not true of the burns victim: Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, pp. 37–8.

of St Thomas Becket relate how the boy was playing by a deep pool in an ironstone quarry dropping stones on the frogs that lived in the water, a detail no doubt given both to lend the narrative greater immediacy and to emphasise the youth of the child.⁴² The boy accidentally fell in and was entirely engulfed by the water. His father on returning home and not finding his son set off to look for him. He searched all over (*ubique et villitim quaesitum*) and eventually discovered his submerged body. This resonates with the propensity of fathers to be noted as first finders in respect of dead sons in verdicts from the coroners' courts; there was a cultural expectation that a father would look for his missing son.⁴³ It also introduces an element of pathos. As the sun began to set and darkness fell the father pulled from the pool the lifeless body of his son, swollen by the water. The inert body is carried home and many others come along to lend their support. In their anguish the child's father groans, his mother weeps. In vain the people attempt to revive the child by tearing off the clothes that constrict his swollen body, suspending him upside down, and beating the soles of his feet. When no water flowed from his mouth, all hope was despaired of. The child is taken down and laid out on a table or on wooden boards – the two versions of narrative differ slightly – and fires are lit at opposite ends of the room.

At dawn the next morning the child's mother had St Thomas' Water sent for from the neighbouring village and tried to administer it herself using a spindle – something of a gender signifier – to hold open the child's clenched teeth, but the spindle slipped and the teeth clamped tight on the mother's finger, cutting into the flesh. She cried out. Her husband then took a small knife to try once more to prise the teeth apart, but was only able to free his wife's finger by knocking out two of the child's front teeth. Now the Water could be applied. The first two attempts fail and the Water trickles back out of the child's mouth, but the parents persist and the third time the Water is swallowed. The boy unclenches his hand and opens one eye. His father asks him if he wants to live and the child replied *»volo vivere«* – 'I want to live'. The boy's distended stomach then began to return to its original size, though no water was excreted. William of Canterbury's account concludes by explaining how the narrator learned of these events from the father when he gave thanks to the saint accompanied by his son.

The narrative follows the tripartite model of drowning, an interval in which the saint's aid is invoked, followed by restoration to life. There is considerable pathos and drama built into the account. The child is presented as an ordinary little boy who amuses himself by harassing frogs in a pool. He falls in and drowns alone, entirely submerged under the waters of a deep pool. Only at nightfall is his limp body pulled from the water and carried back to his home. Numbers of people crowd in to offer their sympathy and assist in the futile, because human, attempts to revive a child that is clearly dead. With dawn, however, the boy's mother is inspired to invoke divine intervention through the intercession of Thomas Becket, but the Water has to be sent for and is administered only with great perseverance on the part of the parents. Only with the third attempt does the Water actually enter the inert child's body with almost immediate effect. The resonances of some of the details would not be missed by a medieval audience. The child's drowning and subsequent restoration to life mirrors Christ's Passion: his drowning and subsequent removal from the water as darkness fell echoes Christ's death on and subsequent deposition from the cross; his lifeless body

42 Abbott, *St Thomas of Canterbury*, 2, pp. 162–169.

43 This observation is impressionistic. Hanawalt discusses parents as first finders, but does not offer a gendered analysis: Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, p. 87.

placed on wooden boards or a table is reminiscent of Christ's lifeless body being placed in the tomb; the child's immediate revival, once the Water of St Thomas was finally swallowed, takes place, like the Resurrection, at dawn. The innocent boy child thus stands in for Christ just as the triple administration of the Water is symbolic of the Trinity. But the Water itself, containing as it does tiny parts of the blood of the martyred saint, is, as Rachel Koopmans has also noted, resonant of the Eucharist.⁴⁴ It should be remembered that the doctrine of transubstantiation was still being formulated at the time these narratives were compiled, only becoming doctrine in 1215. The narratives, however, can be seen to reflect contemporary theological thought. Although the compilers of both versions of the narrative end with passages designed to demonstrate the authoritativeness of their texts by reference to the verbal testimony of the boy's father and, in the case of Benedict of Peterborough's text, a written account in the form of a letter from the father's priest, it is nevertheless evident that the common narrative was carefully recast to conform to a structure that was concerned with more profound truths than the specific events of this case.

There may be other ways in which this kind of drowned child restored to life narrative particularly resonates for a high medieval audience. First, the immersion of the boy in the pool resulting in his apparent death due to drowning is akin to the immersion of the infant in the font at baptism. It should be noted that the liturgy of baptism as it had evolved by the time of the Becket miracle collections included the priest blowing on the infant three times, symbolising the Holy Spirit and the driving away of evil spirits, and immersing the infant three times in the water of the font. Again the narrative here, with its insistence that the St Thomas' Water was applied three times, seems knowingly to reference the baptismal ritual. Just as bathing in water cleanses the body, the sacrament of baptism cleanses the child of original sin such that she or he then begins a new life as a member of the Church.⁴⁵ There is a sense in which the sacrament gives new life to the child, just as the intercession of the powerful martyr St Thomas Becket gave new life to the drowned boy.

The second way in which the story might have had contemporary resonances is the then practice of ordeal by cold water in which an accused person's guilt or innocence might be proved by their being placed in a pool of water that had been blessed by a priest. The water so blessed would reject the guilty who, as a consequence, would float to the surface, whereas the innocent would remain immersed.⁴⁶ Such ordeal was used in England in respect of felonies, where guilt was punishable by death or mutilation, primarily only between the Assize of Clarendon (1166) until the time of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) which forbade the clergy's participation.⁴⁷ It is in fact part of the narrative of another miracle in the Becket collections, which may also reflect something of precisely contemporary clerical anxieties about the use of ordeal.⁴⁸ This tells of one Eilward who tried to take away some of his neighbour's possessions

44 Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate*, pp. 34–36.

45 Robin M. Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*, Leiden 2011, pp. 113–115; Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*, Aldershot 2006, ch. 6.

46 Hunt Janin, *Medieval Justice: Cases and Laws in France, England and Germany*, Jefferson/NC, 2004, pp. 15–16.

47 Margaret H. Kerr/Richard D. Forsyth/Michael J. Plyley, *Cold Water and Hot Iron: Trial by Ordeal in England*, in: *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22 (1992) 4, pp. 573–595, esp. p. 573; Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal*, Oxford 1986, pp. 63–66.

48 John W. Baldwin, *The crisis of the ordeal: literature, law, and religion around 1200*, in: *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies* 24 (1994), pp. 327–353, esp. pp. 340–341.

by way of compensation when the neighbour failed to return a debt. Learning of his actions, his neighbour ran after him, assaulted him, and accused him of theft. As a consequence Eilward was held in prison, where a priest persuaded him to put himself under the protection of the martyred Thomas Becket. At trial, the judge ruled that he be made to undergo the ordeal of cold water. Unfortunately for Eilward, according to William of Canterbury's account, he had been baptised on the eve of Whitsun and consequently, according to folklore, was protected from being burnt or drowned, a folk belief that perhaps also reflects popular perceptions of the power of the sacrament of baptism. Although he was innocent of the charge of theft, Eilward immediately floated and was consequently deemed guilty, castrated, and blinded. Only later did the saint intercede for the man who had placed himself under the saint's protection and his eyes and genitals were restored, although William notes his new testicles were unusually small!⁴⁹ The juxtaposition in the story of Eilward of discussion of the ordeal by water and folklore surrounding baptism tends to add weight to my proposition here that both baptism and ordeal by cold water are suggested – knowingly or otherwise – by the topos of the drowned child restored to life by the intervention of the saint.

The reason for the possible over-representation of drowning in coroners' records is more mundane and hence more briefly discussed. Any over-representation is, of course, comparative. Drownings of children, particularly of toddlers in ponds, ditches and the like were probably common enough and we need hardly suppose that they were as regularly reported to the county coroners or investigated by them as the law in fact required. The mere fact that any analysis of cases from one sample to another shows so many inconsistencies in patterns by age and gender strongly implies considerable variation in the propensity of communities to involve coroners in relation to suspicious and accidental deaths.⁵⁰ However, the corollary of the argument that part of the motivation of juries in coroners' cases was to deflect blame is that this same concern provided a reason to ensure the coroner was involved in the first place. In a society where news, information and reputation were so much a matter of word of mouth, the most significant factor determining whether the coroner was called was probably the issue of public knowledge. An accidental death within the home where no hint of suspicion was raised might be kept from the coroner since an inquest would serve no obvious purpose and would merely deprive the community of the value of the *deodand*, that is the value of whatever living creature or inanimate object had caused the fatal accident, which was taken by the crown.⁵¹ To give an example, when a jury found that John Hervey had accidentally been run over and crushed to death by his own four-horse cart, the four horses and the cart were together valued at £3 6s. 8d. and his Warwickshire village of Ilmington and – perhaps to defray the unusually heavy cost – three neighbouring settlements duly paid this as *deodand*.⁵²

Personal misfortune and the emotional and economic stress that was caused to those close to the victim was thus compounded by a very real sense that such misfortune was used by the crown as an excuse to levy extraordinary taxation, surely a strong disincentive for involving the coroner wherever the preconditions just noted did not apply. The Bedfordshire coroners' rolls for 1265–1276, for example, record no accidental deaths or homicides in respect of infants below one year, though the rolls as a whole record the accidental deaths of 40 children

49 Abbott, *St Thomas of Canterbury*, 2, pp. 80–101.

50 Goldberg, *Childhood and gender*, pp. 255–257.

51 Gross, *Select Cases*, p. xxiv.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

between the ages of one and eleven years or more.⁵³ Analogy with modern accidental fatality evidence, such as the findings of Soori and Naghavi in respect of childhood deaths for a rural region of Iran, suggests that such a pattern is highly implausible.⁵⁴ Conversely, that the jury returned verdicts of rightful death, and thus the consequence of neither homicide nor accident, in respect of two of four baby girls whose deaths in London between 1322 and 1340 were investigated seems remarkable because such verdicts are so unusual.⁵⁵ Here we may suppose either that the deaths of babies of one-day-old and a one-week-old were reported by neighbours as suspicious or that their deaths were reported specifically to deflect suspicion – merited or otherwise.

The observations just made tend to suggest two different phenomena operating in respect of death by drowning that underpin a comparatively, but not an absolutely (in terms of numbers of deaths) high rate of reporting. On the one hand the accidental drownings of children over the age of one, that is toddlers able to go outdoors and so by misfortune fall into bodies of water and older children whose accidental deaths are often described in relation to fetching water (girls) or swimming or working with boats (boys), are reported precisely because they do take place outdoors and in public areas. That said, local factors produce rather different reporting and recording biases in respect of the ages and gender of victims. On the other hand there may be some deaths that need to be presented as accidents. This last is almost certainly true of the drowning of some adult women, but we can be less sure in respect of child drowning victims. Thus, to give a uniquely telling example, an Essex coroner's jury returned that on Palm Sunday John Driver had savagely beaten his wife, Agnes, and dumped her in a water-filled pit believing her to be already dead. In fact she survived, her head just above the water, and was discovered and taken from the pit on Good Friday, only to die the following Thursday, presumably having had opportunity – unlike those women who were taken dead from the pit or the well – to tell her story.⁵⁶ (Of course the resonances of this narrative with the Passion is rather suggested by the singularly telling chronology; like little Geoffrey, the boy who drowned in the pool in the ironstone quarry and was pulled out as darkness fell, Agnes, dumped still living on Palm Sunday, was taken from the water of the well five days later on the very day Christ died.)

As just observed, it was not just children who drowned in bodies of water. Small children especially, only comparatively recently baptised and so cleansed of sin, were probably thought of as essentially unfortunate, but innocent victims. Women like Agnes Driver were the innocent victims of men who abused the power and authority they had over their wives. There is one other category of drowning victim I wish to notice. When Edith Rogers was found drowned in a small rain-filled pit in the highway, the verdict of the Slimbridge (Gloucestershire) jury was that she fell in and drowned ›de sua propria negligencia et insania‹ – ›of her own negligence and insanity‹.⁵⁷ Likewise, a Yorkshire jury implicitly explained the drowning

53 Ibid., table 1, p. 255. Young people are increasingly unlikely to be identified by age from about 12 years, so the numbers in the ›11 years or more‹ category is not large.

54 Soori/Naghavi, Childhood deaths from unintentional injuries, table 3, p. 223. Of over 1,800 deaths they recorded for all children aged up to 14 years, 300 were associated with infants below one year.

55 Sharpe, Calendar of Coroners' Rolls, pp. 254–255.

56 Gross, Select Cases, pp. 45–46.

57 Ibid., pp. 49–50.

of young man, whom they reported to have fallen in a pond, by describing the victim as ›Robert, son of John of Hunsingore, who was a fool‹ – ›qui fatuus fuit.‹⁵⁸

By focusing on stories of child drownings, this article has stressed the essentially fictive nature of both juries' verdicts in coroners' cases and miracle narratives, two important sources for the study of childhood in the medieval era, and particularly the high medieval era. In so doing it has questioned analytical approaches that treat these sources as essentially ›factual‹ and so also the unproblematic reading of statistical observations derived from them. In stressing the way actual events – real deaths, actual family tragedies, or in the case of children who survived near drowning, authentic stories of anguish followed by joy – were repeatedly recast and retold to suit particular agendas – promoting a saint, deflecting blame or suspicion – the resulting narratives can be viewed as much as cultural as social documents. These narratives were created in a larger social, political, ideological, and devotional context that both helps shape them and is reflected in them. Thus ideas about the Eucharist and transubstantiation resonate in some of the miracle narratives relating to Thomas Becket. Similarly I have suggested that an understanding of the sacrament of baptism and of the workings of the judicial ordeal by cold water help make sense of these same narratives. I would argue, however, that some of these cultural understandings also helped shape verdicts given in coroners' courts. The death of a child by drowning was a cruel fate, terrible for those that suffered the loss. Invocation of a saint's intercession might sometimes bring a child back to life, but, as the coroners' rolls insistently demonstrate, for some toddlers, unlucky children, and their grieving parents and siblings, death endured. However, in a culture that believed that the water of baptism washed away sin and gave new life and that the blessed water used in judicial ordeal accepted only the innocent and rejected the guilty, perhaps there was a little comfort in knowing that the victims of drowning were the innocent – the young child, the murdered wife, the insane – who as such may be lost to this life, but would surely be received into a new and better life.⁵⁹

58 Ibid., pp. 123–124. Wendy Turner states that the term ›fatuus‹ implies mental deficiency: Wendy Turner, *Madness in Medieval Law and Custom*, Leiden 2010, p. 42.

59 These remarks are in marked contrast to the argument made by Chris Daniell in his discussion of drowning as a particularly horrible form of death specifically appropriate to unbelievers such as the Egyptians in the Red Sea. He also rightly remarks the Christian horror of drowning should this mean no body was recovered for burial. I do not see my argument as in fact significantly conflicting with Daniell's. First, all the drownings noted in coroners' rolls necessarily concerned victims whose bodies had been recovered, just as the drowned subjects of miracle narratives had been restored to life by the saint's intervention. The particular point I am making though is that the drowning victims I am concerned with here are all presented as innocents. There are adult male victims of drowning in coroners' rolls, but these may sometimes implicitly implicate the victim in his own death by asserting drunkenness, which of course is also a way of deflecting blame without implying suicide. For example there are several cases from thirteenth-century Lynn where a drowned victim was said to have been drunk – ›inebriatus fuit: Chris Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England: 1066–1550*, London 1997, pp. 71–74; Dorothy M. Owen, *The Making of King's Lynn: A Documentary Survey*, London 1984, pp. 425, 427–429.