P A T R I C I A   S K I N N E R

Gender and the Sign Languages of Poverty

Was medieval poverty gendered? At first sight the answer to this question might seem self-evidently, yes. It seems to be an unchanging phenomenon that women on average were and are more likely to fall into poverty, as defined by contemporaries, than men.[1] Judith Bennett has highlighted, for instance, the persistence of low pay accorded to women for the same work as men, with the rate holding remarkably steadily around the 70% level between the later Middle Ages, when such estimates are possible, and the modern day. Even in paid employment, women in the thirteenth century might not have been able to support themselves or their child/ren, according to Sharon Farmer. And this discrimination has continued: Barbara Nelson highlighted in the 1980s that women formed the majority of recipients of means-tested social welfare payments in the United States.[2] We shall return to women's poverty and responses to it later in this paper. However, our main focus here is to examine how the gender dynamics of poverty were expressed within the languages and ideologies of medieval Christian Europe, and how these compared, in some instances, with the attitudes prevalent in Jewish communities of the Mediterranean. The comparison is not a perfect one, by any means, but may point to future lines of research.

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[1] I adduced some of the relevant early medieval evidence in my article 'Gender and poverty in the medieval community', in *Medieval Women in their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Cardiff, 1997), 204-221.

[2] Judith Bennett, 'Less money than a man would take', in *ead.*, *History, Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (University of Pennsylvania Press/Manchester University Press), forthcoming (I thank Judith for sharing the manuscript of her book with me prior to publication); Sharon Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris* (Ithaca, 2002), 164; Barbara Nelson, 'Women's Poverty and Women's Citizenship: Some Political Consequences of Economic Marginality', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10.2 (1984), 209-231.

In the space allowed, it is clearly impossible to provide a complete over-
view of the ways in which gender and poverty intersect; indeed, much em-
pirical work remains to be done in order to provide illustrative examples. But
it is important to recognise that the application of gender theory to the prob-
lem of poverty is particularly useful to historians because, although the term
'gender', as understood by women's and feminist historians, is traditionally
used as a shorthand for the differences in status or roles of men and women,
its roots in social history in fact demand that it also be used to analyse the
structures of power, of which a male/female hierarchy is only a part. Poverty
is gendered because the poor are, almost without exception, a powerless
group and the categories thought of as poor and/or weak in medieval society
correspond closely with the categories of medieval individual whom gender
historians are most likely to be found studying.[3] The corollary to this, how-
ever, is that the groups of most interest to gender historians are those least
likely to have left traces in the written and archaeological record (as David
Austin points out, in the case of the latter). The poor, if they are recorded at
all in the written record, are 'contained' within written texts generated by the
medieval elite, be they sermons, records of charitable giving, lists of taxpay-
ers (where the poorest in Paris, for example, were termed *les menus* – the
least). Hence the historiography of medieval poverty has tended to focus on
institutional responses, through hospitals, for example, or legislation which
sought to control the 'problem' of the poor.[4] Each of these defined their ver-
sion of the poor in different ways. Gender history, engaging as it does with
the poststructural argument that language constitutes social reality, demands
that we try to reach beyond institutional definitions of the 'poor' in medieval
society, and seek to reconstruct something of the subjective and everyday
lives of those individuals who fell into this all-encompassing category. In
this paper I shall explore to what extent the dominant religious discourses of
the Middle Ages made any distinctions between male and female poverty,
and what, if any, the distinguishing signs were.

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[3] It is regrettable, however, that the recent, otherwise excellent book of essays on early
medieval gender focuses on the gender identities of the elite: Leslie Brubaker and Julia H.
M. Smith, ed., *Gender in the Early Medieval World* (Cambridge, 2004).

[4] See for example, Miri Rubin, *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge* (Cam-
bridge, 1987), John Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Later Medieval Florence* (Oxford,
1994) and Sheila Sweetinburgh, *The Role of the Hospital in Medieval England: gift-giv-
ing and the spiritual economy* (Dublin, 2004).

Who fell into the category of 'poor'? Other contributors to this round ta-
ble have identified a real problem in even determining what 'poverty' meant
to medieval people, with a continuum stretching from the destitute with no
basic sustenance all the way to a perceived loss of status in comparison with
one's normal social position, which might have been comfortably off. To put
it another way, the 'poverty line' was a moveable one. Bronislaw Geremek's
classic study of late medieval Paris appears to include only those for whom
begging was a means of subsistence as the true poor.[5] However, even the
term 'beggar' was fluid: it was used, in the documents discarded by the me-
dieval Jewish community of Old Cairo, not for the mendicant poor but to
describe smaller merchants, artisans and craftsmen.[6] This ambiguity is a
product of our sources, for economic deprivation, it seems, was only a part
of the equation which made someone 'poor'. If we briefly review the biblical
models underpinning the medieval discourse on poverty, we find the poor as
one of four groups defined in the Old Testament as needing justice and spe-
cial compassion: the others were widows, orphans and the sojourner (a for-
eigner living in Israel). In the agrarian society of the ancient Near East, the
lack of an adult male was understood as an involuntary accident of life
which deprived the family of its major bread-winner in the sense of cultiva-
tor of the land.[7] It was thus contingent, and could be temporary: widows
might remarry and/or find husbands for their orphaned daughters, orphan
boys would grow into adult males themselves. And their poverty was rela-
tive: it did not have to mean total destitution, just a loss of former social

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[5] Bronislaw Geremek, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris* (Cambridge, 1987),
193.

[6] Shelomo Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, 1967), 79. This expres-
sion is only one example of the rather different social perspectives of the Jewish commu-
nity revealed by this invaluable source – even paid employment, rather than autonomous
entrepreneurship, was seen as degrading: *ibid.*, 92-99.

[7] Donald E. Gowan, 'Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament: the Case of the Widow, the
Orphan and the Sojourner', *Interpretation* 41.4 (October 1987), 341-353, at 343. It is no-
table that the Jewish community of Old Fustat in Egypt continued to help these categories
of people, as medieval alms lists from the genizah or document store there reveal: besides
widows and orphans, the most numerous group was poor foreigners: Goitein, *A Mediter-
ranean Society* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 6), vol. 1, 56. The strong sense of public philanthropy
among the Jewish community, it seems, encouraged people to travel in search of help,
ibid., 57.

status and power.[8] Katharina Simon-Muscheid's contribution to this round table demonstrates clearly that the discourse of loss and lack of status continued into the Middle Ages. The theme of powerlessness is continued in New Testament sources. Bruce Malina's study of this subject reveals an opposition between the greedy rich and the powerless poor but, as he states, these are not exact opposites.[9] Poverty is again not wholly about economic lack. The four groups outlined in Old Testament sources are joined by numerous physically disabled persons who, similarly, were unable to work and might suffer from injustices. For all of these groups the necessity was not to become rich - indeed, extreme wealth was viewed as negatively as extreme poverty - but simply to receive help from those who were in a position to give it. As developed by the Church Fathers and Jewish legal sources, the economic duty of giving of alms to such needy groups would lead to divine reward. As the Talmud put it 'he who gives alms to the poor beholds the countenance of God',[10] whilst canonists of the twelfth and thirteenth century devoted much attention to the problem of what to do with superfluous property, and what right the poor had to receive alms.[11] It is possible, therefore, to see a subtle shift towards the definition of poverty as economic lack in the promotion of such charitable activity, on which the self-identity of the medieval church is held to have been based.[12] This may of course be due to the fact that a material contribution to temporarily alleviate the problem was much easier than addressing the underlying causes of poverty: the inevitable presence of the poor in society seems not to have been challenged.[13] Indeed,

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[8] Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History*, tr. A. Goldhammer (New Haven and London, 1986) [orig. French edition Paris, 1978], 6, usefully discusses this loss of status.

[9] Bruce Malina, 'Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World', *Interpretation* 41.4 (October 1987), 354-367, at 355. A similar opposition is seen in tenth-century Byzantine legislation: Rosemary Morris, 'The Powerful and the Poor in Tenth-Century Byzantium: Law and Reality', *Past and Present* 73 (1976), 3-27.

[10] Church Fathers: Rebecca H. Weaver, 'Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church', *Interpretation* 41.4 (October 1987), 368-381; Jewish law: Shelomo Dov Goitein, 'The Mediterranean Mind in the High Middle Ages (950-1250) as Reflected in the Cairo Geniza Documents', in *Amalfi nel Medioevo: Convegno Internazionale 14-16 giugno 1973* (Salerno, 1977), 177-192, quote at 189.

[11] Brian Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law: a Sketch of Canonical Theory and Its Application in England* (Berkeley, 1959), 37.

[12] Weaver, 'Wealth and Poverty' (*op. cit. supra*, n. 10), 381.

[13] It is a social issue which has of course challenged successive generations of thinkers. For example, Richard Teichgraeber, 'Hegel on Property and Poverty', *Journal of the History*

their visibility reminded those who were well-off to give alms, and thereby earn a spiritual reward.

But the issue was not simply one of access to economic resources. Regardless of the place or period, all studies agree that almost more debilitating for the poor was and is the 'enormous scorn for their public dependency',[14] or the loss of status, whether temporary or permanent, which accompanied poverty.[15] Poverty could therefore mean a loss of power relative to one's normal social status, and it was not inevitable for all people. St Basil of Caesarea, preaching in response to a famine which hit Cappadocia in Asia Minor in the 360s, castigated the congregation at a penitential service for walking past the starving poor (*penetes*) rather than opening up their hoarded stores of food.[16] The theme of the well-off refusing to aid the poor is a common one, and Basil's words are echoed by Peter of Blois in 1194 when he took bishop Raoul of Lisieux to task for speculating on grain prices rather than distributing his stores to the poor.[17] Both sources highlight again the temporary, and *unnecessary* nature of the poverty afflicting the area. If those who had food shared it, they imply, the poor would not starve. We should note in passing that neither writer makes any distinction between male and female suffering.

This lack of distinction recurs in modern treatments of medieval poverty. As Sharon Farmer has recently acutely observed, 'our understanding of the medieval poor is incomplete in part because modern medievalists have failed to address the multiplicity of medieval gender categories ...'[18] Certainly it

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of Ideas 38 (1977), 47-64, explores how Hegel dealt, inconclusively, with the political implications of the permanent presence of the poor in society, reducing the issue to the individual's personal responsibility and refusing to allow that the state should intervene. Robert Fatton Jnr., 'Hegel and the riddle of poverty: the limits of bourgeois political economy', *History of Political Economy* 18 (1986), 579-600, reaches similar conclusions, suggesting, p. 580, that Hegel resigned himself to the inevitability of a 'penurious rabble'.

[14] Nelson, 'Women's Poverty' (*op. cit. supra*, n. 2) , 221.

[15] Gowan, 'Wealth and Poverty' (*op. cit. supra*, n. 7), 352. The shame caused by poverty is summed up by a bequest of the Jew Jacob Boniac in 1398 to the 'abashed poor': Robert .I. Burns, *Jews in the Notarial Culture: Latinate Wills in Mediterranean Spain* (Berkeley, 1996), 121.

[16] Susan R. Holman, 'The Hungry Body: Famine, Poverty and Identity in Basils' *Hom.* 8', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7.3 (1999), 337-363, at 343. Geremek, *Margins of Society* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 5), 202, also notes the use of children by beggars to excite the pity of passers-by.

[17] Quoted in Michel Mollat, *Poor in the Middle Ages* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 8), 108.

[18] Farmer, *Surviving Poverty* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 2), 1-2.

was not an analytical tool used in (or available to) earlier studies: Geremek's work on Paris, for example, uses such categories only when his sources made the distinction between the 'true' and 'false' poor, the former including the crippled, sick, old, widows and orphans, that is, those for whom work was impossible and who thus had the right to seek assistance.[19] Such categories had a long history. But there is an inherent tension between the discourses of the Church, which explicitly labelled those likely to need help as 'miserable persons', and the subjective, personalised and thus differentiated histories of poor people, which scholars such as Farmer are now attempting to reconstruct.[20] For certain women and their children the route out of poverty rested upon their lack of social status in comparison to adult males. They were recognised in both Christian and non-Christian cultures as requiring special care, especially in the cases of widows and orphans. Poor through no fault of their own, they were deemed worthy of help since they did not have the means to help themselves.

Remaining unmarried, too, could be a sign of poverty in a society which expected brides to come with dowry payments. Assistance was manifested in a gendered way in the frequent charitable bequests found in medieval wills: the provision of dowries for poor girls. Such bequests were common in Christian wills, particularly after the inflation of dowries from the twelfth century onwards,[21] and are found also in the Latinate Jewish wills of medieval Spain studied by Robert Burns, which acknowledge explicitly the vulnerability of women remaining single. The example he cites, the 1286 will of Sara, the widow of Davi, resident in Perpignan, provides not only dowries for Jewish poor girls, but in fact leaves almost her entire estate for the education of poor Jewish children. It is unclear whether 'children' should be read as 'boys' in this instance, but highly likely.[22] Women's fortunes, therefore, rested upon marriage, and they received support to achieve this goal. The idea was a powerful one, based on an assumption of women's primary

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[19] Geremek, *Margins of Society* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 5), 169.

[20] On gender's welding of the 'subjective and personal' onto history, see Penelope J. Corfield, 'History and the Challenge of Gender History', *Rethinking History* 1.3 (1997), 241-258, at 244.

[21] See the discussion by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families* (New Haven and London, 1985), 224-226.

[22] Robert I. Burns, *Jews in the Notarial Culture* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 15), 87-89. In another example cited by Burns, 111, the Jewish widow Reina, of Valls in Catalonia, similarly left 500 *solidi* to marry off Jewish girls.

role as mothers, and it would persist into modern welfare legislation.[23] Yet even such explicit bequests in wills may not bring us to the realities of poverty as experienced in the Middle Ages. The provision of a dowry was part and parcel of a public ritual, signifying the marriage and the union of two families, but did its importance diminish further down the social scale? Does the term 'poor girl' in wills represent a truly destitute single woman? Or is it in fact coded language for a girl of similar or slightly lower social status to the testator, whose reputation or that of her family were threatened by temporary or permanent financial difficulty? Or are such bequests in fact a product of their age, when the flourishing urban society of twelfth-century and later medieval Europe had thrown up the phenomenon of more young girls migrating away from their families to seek work as domestic servants? If so, the bequests might be read as much as a moral judgement as a charitable impulse.

But not all single women, widows and orphans were poor; poverty was not confined to these groups and disabled, non-working men. An approach to poverty taking gender as its main category of analysis exposes the inadequacy of formal lines of charity to help, for example, working men with large families or single women with children.[24] The contention that patriarchy is as much a issue between higher and lower status men (Robert Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' has been influential here)[25] has been influential in moving gender history away from a focus simply on women's issues. The application of gender theory to the history of poverty, whilst perhaps creating a low-key epistemological shift in the way the latter is studied, also exposes the multiplicity of interpretations within gender theory itself.[26] For some feminist historians, the realisation that poverty and powerlessness were *not* women-centred issues may be troubling, undermining the theory of patriarchy as the dominance of men over women's produc-

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[23] A parallel here is the Mothers' Aid pension, developed in 1911 after the 1909 White House conference on dependent children found that 'children of parents of worthy characters, suffering from temporary misfortune, and children of reasonably efficient and deserving mothers who are without the support of the normal breadwinner should, as a rule, be kept with their parents, such aid being given as may be necessary...' Quoted in Nelson, 'Women's Poverty', (*op. cit. supra*, n. 2), 229.

[24] Farmer, *Surviving Poverty* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 2), 63 and 164 respectively.

[25] Robert W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge, 1995).

[26] Corfield, 'History and the Challenge of Gender History' (*op. cit. supra*, n. 20), 254, argues that pluralist inclusivity is the hallmark of current gender history.

tive and reproductive lives.[27] After all, the formula found most often in me-
dieval documents was 'widows, orphans *and* the poor', that is, a more subtle
analysis of the Church's language regarding the poor also offers support for
a more inclusive study of the history of poverty which incorporates men's as
well as women's experiences. A major difference, already highlighted, was
the expectation, at least by the later Middle Ages, that men should work to
feed themselves and/or their families, and that those who were able to and
did not did not in turn deserve the generosity of others. This stipulation,
which had been expressed by Augustine and was taken up again the 13th-
century *Glossa Ordinaria*,[28] does not appear to have ever been applied to
women (although the use of children to invoke the pity of passers-by surely
suggests that female beggars might not necessarily attract help if seen alone).

This difference, and the example cited earlier of provision of dowries for
poor girls, suggest that further work is needed to tease out the specifics signs
of poverty as they relate to men and women. A fruitful line of enquiry may
be that of dress. As a quite literally material sign of economic well-being,
dress was the subject of some scrutiny in medieval society, and women's
dress even more so. The Old Testament's description of the proud women of
Jerusalem provided ample ammunition for those who inveighed against
women's love of adornment,[29] and we are familiar with the notion of elite
women's dress ostentatiously expressing the material wealth and status of
their natal and marital families, if only through the numerous and repeated
examples of sumptuary legislation attempting to curb such excess. But such
legislation, ironically, points up the ambiguity of expensive dress - according
to some regulations, it could equally mark out a prostitute.[30] And shabbiness

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[27] See the discussion of the tension between women's and gender history in Laura Lee
Downs, *Writing Gender History* (London, 2004), 73-74.

[28] Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 11), 58. He notes increasingly harsh state-
ments along these lines in later glosses.

[29] Isaiah 3.16-24 narrates how the Lord would punish women through shaving their heads,
removing the jewellery around their heads (including nose rings), necks, fingers and an-
kles, and depriving them of their fine veils, robes, gowns, cloaks, purses, revealing gar-
ments and long veils on their heads. But crucially, the passage ends with the ultimate pun-
ishment, deprivation of their menfolk, at which point the women plead (4.1) that they are
capable of feeding and clothing themselves but cannot endure the shame of remaining
unmarried.

[30] On sumptuary laws, Catherine Kovesi Killerby, *Sumptuary Law in Italy, 1200-1500* (Ox-
ford, 2002). For the fine line between the richly-dressed woman and the prostitute, see
Ruth Mazo Karras, '"Because the other is a poor woman she shall be called his wench":

of dress is even more tricky to interpret. Secondhand clothing was a thriving business in medieval Europe, and many women in fact made their living from this trade,[31] so the possession of old clothes did not necessarily indicate poverty as such.[32] When in 1398 the Jew Jacob Boniac of Puigcerda in the Pyrenees left 'all my clothing to my poor relations',[33] his impulse may have been, literally, to keep up family appearances, rather than indicating desperate need on the part of the recipients. Women, too (and more frequently), took care to pass on items of dress in their wills:[34] does this indicate a heightened consciousness on their part of the symbolic power of clothing to indicate social status or, at the least, respectability? It is difficult to judge in transactions between adults, but certainly the language of widows' documents from southern Italy emphasises the need to clothe and put shoes on their children.

This brings us full circle to the incontrovertible fact that poverty among medieval women is most visible among widowed mothers, for they had the backing of the church as an institution in demanding assistance, and therefore some vestige of their voices is preserved.[35] But how do we identify the

Gender, Sexuality and Social Status in Late Medieval England', in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternak (Minneapolis, 2003), 210-229, at 213-214; see also James Brundage, 'Sumptuary Laws and Prostitution in Late Medieval Italy', *Journal of Medieval History* 13 (1987), 343-355. The extremes to which regulation of dress could go is shown by the detailed regulations of Amedeus VIII of Savoy in 1430, discussed in Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages* (New Haven and London, 1997), 83-86.

[31] David Herlihy, *Opera Muliebra: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (New York and London, 1990), cites examples of female old-clothes-dealers in late medieval Toulouse (p. 95), Paris (p. 146) and Bologna (p. 155).

[32] An interesting but altogether exceptional example of the differing significance of old and tattered clothing is given by Liutprand of Cremona, ambassador for the German Emperor Otto I to the Byzantine court in the late tenth century, who (deliberately or otherwise) misinterprets the revered but ancient garments used the imperial procession he witnessed: Liudprand of Cremona, *The Embassy to Constantinople*, chapter 9, in *The Embassy to Constantinople and Other Writings*, tr. F. A. Wright, ed. John Julius Norwich (London, 1993), 181.

[33] Burns, *Jews in the Notarial Culture* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 15), 121.

[34] E.g. the wills of the Anglo-Saxon woman Wulfwaru: *English Historical Documents* I, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford, 1954), 524, and that of Bellenda of Genoa: Steven Epstein, *Wills and Wealth in Medieval Genoa, 1150-1250* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1984), 125-6.

[35] See, from a later period, the cases studied by Pamela Sharpe, 'Survival Strategies and Stories: Poor Widows and Widowers in Early Industrial England', in *Widowhood in Me-*

truly poor among them? In an earlier paper I identified the surrender of their own children as an extreme measure.[36] In the Latin examples from southern Italy, however, beyond an assurance that the children would be cared for and receive some material benefit at the end of a fixed term, implying a period of service to those receiving them, there is no overt indication of extreme poverty. But the documents of the Jewish community in Old Cairo seem to be far more explicit: here we see children being pledged in return for services or loans by a widow and a blind woman (whom it may be suggested was also widowed) in al-Mahdiyya (Tunisia) and Fustat respectively. Taken together with Goitein's assertion that child labour is rarely mentioned in the genizah documents and may have been obviated by the Jewish community's concern for education, the mortgages of children by women must, I think, be a reliable sign of poverty in these cases.[37]

What is striking, but to be treated with some caution, is that explicit expressions of women's poverty are almost always made by widows, fulfilling the expectation raised by the church's ideology that this was indeed a vulnerable group. Widowhood as a status has received much recent attention from medieval historians, emphasising it both as a time of vulnerability and loss of male protection, but also, sometimes, as a period of emancipation from male control in terms of property management.[38] Regional and cultural variations, however, serve to challenge the idea that widows shared common experiences.[39] Michel Mollat's helpful distinction between the *conjunctural*

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dieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (London, 1999), 220-239.

[36] Skinner, 'Gender and Poverty' (*op. cit. supra*, n. 1), 211.

[37] Goitein, *Mediterranean Society* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 6), vol. 1, 259 (mortgages) and 98 (child labour).

[38] Cavallo and Warner, ed., *Widowhood* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 35); Louise Mirrer, ed., *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor, 1992); Emmanuelle Santinelli, *Des femmes eplorées? Les veuves dans la société aristocratique du haut moyen age* (Lille, 2003); Robert A. Wood, 'Poor Widows, c. 1393-1415', in *Medieval London Widows, 1300-1500*, ed. Caroline Barron and Anne Sutton (London, 1994), 55-69; Ariel Guiance, 'El costo social de la muerte: viudas y huérfanos en la Castilla medieval', *História (São Paulo)* 19 (2000), 37-53.

[39] For example, legal variations between regions might mean that widows enjoyed very different rights over their own and their husbands' property, as in the contrast between French and Flemish customs highlighted by David Nicholas, 'Of Poverty and Primacy: Demand, Liquidity and the Flemish Economic Miracle, 1050-1200', *American Historical Review* 96 (1991), 17-41, at 37. Jewish widows, too, might enjoy different

poverty of the temporarily distressed and the *structural* poverty of those who would never be able to ameliorate their circumstances enables us to reflect further on the fluid status of the medieval widow. He draws heavily on similar distinctions made by late antique commentators, even if the Greek terms used, *penes* and *ptochos*, seem to have been somewhat fluidly applied.[40] The poverty of widows falls within both categories: they were believed to be *structurally* vulnerable as lone women, regardless of their access to resources, and thus in need of protection by the Church or, by extension, medieval rulers responsible for the well-being of their subjects. This accords with a feminist perspective of the medieval Church as a paternalistic institution reinforcing the subjection of women to male-centred hierarchical codes organised around the centrality of marriage or paternal supervision, but at the same time presents a generic view of widows-as-a-group, undifferentiated by their actual economic circumstances.

But the *conjunctural* poverty of widows, the accident of life which drew them into the sphere of the Church's protection and might well be a temporary status, attracts the gender historian keen to reconstruct the subjective experience of those women. Failing remarriage or other familial support, the poor widow was accepted as a deserving case for charity. The wealthy widow, on the other hand, might come under conflicting pressures as to her remarriage, and seek the Church's protection through retirement to a contemplative life. Here we see the inadequacy of an economic definition of 'poor' – widows were counted among the weak whatever their economic circumstances. For the gender historian addressing poverty, however, this does not adequately reflect the *agency* of widows in addressing their situation: their discursive vulnerability was not always played out in reality. The case of the wealthy widow Juliana, refused a hearing in a church court on account of the fact that she was not poor, shows that there was some attempt to discern the technically 'wretched' (under which category her widowhood placed her) from the genuinely vulnerable.[41] In medieval southern Italy, there are a number of examples of widows *adopting* the discourse in order to

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rights to their Christian neighbours: Cheryl Tallan, 'Medieval Jewish Widows: Their Control of Resources', *Jewish History* 5 (1991), 63-74.

[40] Mollat, *Poor in the Middle Ages* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 8), 26; cf. Morris, 'Powerful and the Poor' (*op. cit. supra*, n. 9), 17 and Holman, 'Hungry Body' (*op. cit. supra*, n. 16), 342, n.20.

[41] Pope Innocent IV also addressed this problem in his *Decretals* in c.1250: on this and Juliana see Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 11), 17-18.

get around legal obstacles, arguing their poverty, or that of their children, to allow them to access resources which the law prevented them from managing alone.[42] These are not economically poor widows, clearly, but nor do they conform to the stereotype of women seeking male protection: the implication of their actions is that, given permission to liquidate land to raise money, they will maintain their own and their children's independence. And the Church's focus on widows also conceals the lack of provision made for other vulnerable groups, such as lone single women whose status, as we have already seen, was often ambiguous.[43]

I want now to move on to the case of orphans, again identified as a vulnerable group by both Jewish and Christian ideology, but also receiving considerable attention from gender historians as part of the wider revision of ideas about the experiences of medieval childhood.[44] A case study from southern Italy, in which the orphans are without both parents,[45] serves to underline the issues I have highlighted here about the fluid definition of 'poverty', and provides a corrective to the image of the Church as idealised protector. In 1181 in the small Italian town of Atrani on the Amalfitan peninsula, a certain John son of Manso and his wife Mosica acted on behalf of their grandsons Roger and Manso in returning a piece of property to the convent of St Laurence in nearby Amalfi. They acted, they say, because the two

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[42] Skinner, 'Gender and Poverty' (*op. cit. supra*, n. 1), 208-210.

[43] See Ann Kettle, 'Prostitutes and Servant Girls in Later Medieval England', in *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Robert R. Edwards and Vickie Ziegler (Woodbridge, 1995), 19-32; the pressures incumbent on single girls in service are also discussed in Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, tr. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago, 1985), pp. 165-177.

[44] See the discussion of Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London, 1990), 155-161.

[45] It should be noted that the term, deriving from the Greek for loss, was also often used to describe those without a father, but with a surviving mother. The most famous example is abbot Guibert of Nogent, who states that the death of his father 'made me an orphan' at the age of eight months: John F. Benton, *Self and Society in Medieval France: the Memoirs of Abbot Guibert of Nogent (1064?-1125)* (New York, 1970), 44. See also Dominique Gangler-Mundwiler, 'Enfants sans père: orphelins et écriture dans le roman cyclique français du Moyen Age', *Littérature, médecine, société* 8 (1986), 5-39 and Marie-Claude Struyf, 'Les orphelins de père dans l'oeuvre romanesque de Jean Renart', in *Les relations de parenté dans le monde médiéval: XIVe colloque du Centre universitaire d'Études de Recherches médiévales d'Aix* (Aix-en Provence, 1989), 273-285.

boys *non illa laborabant quia non potuebant quia sunt parvuli et pauperes*.[46] This document is a useful way to explore the practical experiences of medieval poverty, but as we shall see, it is highly conditioned by the discursive model of poverty outlined above. For a start, we can only surmise, but do not know for sure, that the two young children were being cared for by their grandparents. Secondly, although they had access to a piece of landed property and thus to economic support, their physical inability to work it led to it being relinquished and the boys being described as 'small and poor'. However, the circumstances leading up to the surrender reveal that the church's view had been ambivalent at best. For the convent had pursued the boys for their neglect of the land (*caluniastis ipsi predictis nepotibus nostris* [*sic*]); now, it agreed not to pursue them further. Whether it offered any further support to these poor children is not stated, but it is unlikely: the only benefit they were to receive from their grandparents' action was the cessation of litigation over the land. The ecclesiastical institution had finally accepted that they were, indeed, 'pauperes'. Their poverty was not their own fault, and yet the convent's acceptance of the remission of its land back into its hands was represented as a merciful act (the document states that it is an act of *misericordia*). Thus we see that even those who fell comfortably into the category of the vulnerable deserving of the church's support might in reality face difficulty in obtaining it. Furthermore, the economic requirements of the convent seem to have taken precedence here: there appears to have been no possibility of allowing the land to lay unproductively until the boys were of an age to cultivate it themselves, nor of the grandparents themselves taking it on (we do not, of course, have any idea about their physical capability, but they cannot have been older than their 40s).

We have no further documentation to find out what happened to these two boys next. What were the options for young orphans in medieval society? For the purposes of this paper I exclude at this point abandoned babies, although their existence is again surely an indirect piece of evidence about the desperate poverty of their mothers.[47] Were we to classify the fatherless children discussed above in this category, some kind of indentured or semi-free service in another household was an option, although the vulnerability of young girls in such a situation has been highlighted in more than one

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[46] *Il Codice Perris*, *Cartulario amalfitano sec. X – XV*, ed. Jole Mazzoleni and Renata Orefice, vol. 1 (Amalfi, 1985), 323-324, document no. 168.

[47] John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: the Abandonment of Cildren in Western Europe* (London, 1988).

study.[48] Children might also be given as oblates to the church, whether or-
phans or not, although there developed a significant debate over the religious
vocation of these young people.[49] That the care of orphans was a meritorious
act is expressed in the byname Parnas, visible in the Cairo genizah docu-
ments and denoting one who cares for both orphans and the poor.[50] But most
frequently, surely, they were simply taken in by other family members. At
this point there would be no need for them to appear in the written record
except in the circumstances outlined at Atrani, when the church was recov-
ering its property. Orphans, in any case, appear most frequently in the writ-
ten record alongside their widowed mothers, rather than in the context out-
lined above.

   In conclusion, this discussion has highlighted that the ecclesiastical cate-
gories of widow, orphan and the poor are simply a starting point in our un-
derstanding of the gender dynamics of poverty as experienced in the Middle
Ages. They do, however, shape the type of evidence we are likely to meet
about the experiences of the poor, since much documentation is concerned
with the alleviation of distress, and thus conforms to the accepted ideologies
of who should and should not receive help. A major contribution of gender
analysis to the discussion of medieval poverty is the fact that the concept of
the 'deserving poor', understood to be a later medieval phenomenon and
based largely on legislative materials, should perhaps be interpreted as a way
of distinguishing among mostly men, whose physical fitness was the subject
of scrutiny. Women, it could be argued, enjoyed a less exacting test of their
circumstances, and mothers of children even more so. But their access to
charity was predicated on external judgements as to their moral state: a
never-married mother received little sympathy, and perhaps this explains
why we find mothers forced to give up their children from economic neces-
sity. Thus the ideology of charity limited the groups who had a right to re-
ceive assistance: we might wish to look *outside* these categories to find the
truly impoverished. And even those who technically fulfilled the criteria of
'miserable persons' might not always receive help, as the unhelpful treat-
ment of the orphans of Atrani illustrates.

   To return to my opening question – was poverty gendered? Yes, but we
need to acknowledge that the problem extends beyond male-female di-

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[48] See above, note 43.
[49] Mayke de Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden,
      1995).
[50] Goitein, *Mediterranean Society* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 6), vol. 1, 145.

chotomies, and delve deeper than the prescriptive language of much ecclesi-astical writing to unpick the groups defined therein and to identify others suffering poverty whom the Church did not recognise. In particular, it has proven instructive to compare the respective measures of Christian and Jew-ish communities in the face of poverty: the vulnerable groups identified by each share common roots, but there are interesting differences in the re-sponses to poverty and the languages used to describe it. More cross-cultural work may serve to reveal further divergences;[51] clearly, however, our at-tempts to document 'the poor', as a first stage in reconstructing their lives, must avoid the tendency to universalise that experience. Rather than an un-differentiated group, 'poor' men, women and children might belong to a wide variety of categories, and manifest different signs of their distress.

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[51] Ephraim Shoham Steiner's paper at this round table has revealed the important evidence that disability in the Jewish community did not necessarily lead to impoverishment. Does this mean that the physically disabled Jewish man could maintain his status, perhaps through scholarly achievement, in contrast to his Christian contemporary, for whom physical incapacity threatened a status rested on either military capability or fitness to till the land? Such a distinction would have important implications for our understanding of the categories of medieval masculinity.