

MARTHA F. BOWDEN

Mrs. Yorick and the Midwife: Women's Roles in the Eighteenth-Century Church of England

EARLY IN *TRISTRAM SHANDY* we are introduced to two women who play an important part in the hero's entry into the world, the midwife who delivers him and the parson's wife whose activity secured her that position in the parish twenty years before. Their roles as described in the novel present us with an opportunity to observe the activities open to women in the Church of England in the eighteenth-century, a period in which the church is generally perceived to be a bastion of male privilege and control. They are also interesting because, while they are representative of actual figures in the eighteenth-century parish landscape, Sterne's depiction of them does not entirely conform to the picture generally described by church historians. What is most surprising in the light of modern assumptions about women's roles in English parishes is that, while the midwife conforms to what we know of the period, Mrs. Yorick does not.

In the early chapters of the novel, the midwife is described as an accomplished woman with an established practice, and Mrs. Yorick is identified as the person who got her started. Noticing both her great need ("a widow in great distress, with three or four small children,") and her positive attributes ("a person of decent carriage—grave deportment,—a woman moreover of few words"), the parson's wife realizes she has an opportunity both to help a deserving woman and to fill a need in the parish, "having often lamented an inconvenience, to which her husband's flock had for many years been exposed, inasmuch as there was no such thing as a midwife, of any kind or degree, to be got at ... within less than

six or seven long miles riding." She therefore sees to it that the woman is given some training, and her husband pays the licensing fee to the diocese, "so that, betwixt them both, the good woman was fully invested in the real and corporal possession of her office."¹ We later learn that Yorick, the parson, has another, more personal reason for helping out with his wife's scheme: desperate husbands were accustomed to borrowing, and wearing out, his horses to travel the six or seven miles to the midwife. Nonetheless, "Whatever degree of small merit, the act of benignity in favour of the midwife, might justly claim, or in whom that claim truly rested...certain however it was, that the gentlewoman, the parson's wife, did run away at that time with the whole of it," (1:17).

While the parson's wife might be assumed to hold a significant place in her society, which coincides with the midwife's "world,"² this passage is notable for being Mrs. Yorick's only appearance in the book, and Sterne's sole reference to a clergyman's wife. She does not form part of the parlour circle in which her husband frequently participates, nor is she a member of the female grapevine that spreads the news of Uncle Toby's romance with the Widow Wadman two weeks in advance of its actual beginnings. Furthermore, while both the necessity for licensing the midwife and the description of the controversy between male and female practitioners reflect contemporary reality, Mrs. Yorick's role contradicts the conventional wisdom that clerics' wives did not take on any leadership in parish life until the end of the eighteenth century. Both the historical and the fictional records suggest that if anyone in the parish were to attend to the poor woman's wants it would be the lady of the manor, although Mrs. Shandy is unlikely to have been at Shandy Hall, or even married to Mr. Shandy, twenty

¹ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New, 3 vols, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne (Gainesville, Florida: UP Florida, 1978, 1984) 1:10–11.

² "—by which word *world*, need I in this place inform your worship, that I would be understood to mean no more of it, than a small circle described upon the circle of the great world, of four *English* miles diameter, or thereabouts, of which the cottage where the good old woman lived, is supposed to be the centre," (1:10). We may transfer the centre to the parsonage in order to inscribe Mrs. Yorick's influence. I have chosen to refer to her as Mrs. Yorick, in the absence of any other handle, because Tristram indicates that Yorick is the parson's surname, and thus she would have been called by the parish (1:25).

years before Tristram's birth. She eventually shows her appreciation for Mrs. Yorick by choosing her protégée over the new "scientific operator," Dr. Slop, when it appears that the chief man midwife in the realm, Dr. Manningham, is not available. In any event, Tristram portrays Mrs. Yorick as the obvious person to take on this project: "As no woman thereabouts was better qualified to execute the plan she had formed than herself, the Gentlewoman very charitably undertook it; and having great influence over the female part of the parish, she found no difficulty in effecting it to the utmost of her wishes."

Irene Collins, in her study of the church in Austen's day, reports that the parson's wife was expected to minister to the bodies and not the souls of the congregation; that she was expected to dispense charity, but not lead the Sunday School. Collins believes that the managing clergy wife was a Victorian phenomenon.³ Certainly within Austen's oeuvre there is not much evidence of the clergy wife as unofficial parson; the character who comes closest to that description is an aristocrat, Lady Catherine De Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*, who directs Mr. Collins while he is a bachelor and expects to continue in the same manner with Charlotte Lucas after their marriage. Her job description of a suitable match for Mr. Collins suggests that there was a stereotype available for Austen to satirize: "A clergyman like you must marry.—Chuse properly, chuse a gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way."⁴ Mrs. Elton's attempt to arrange a governesship for Jane Fairfax in *Emma* is seen as emblematic of her overbearing and vulgar character, and certainly not model behavior for anyone, clergy spouse or otherwise. She does not appear to exert sufficient influence over Jane, much less the other women of the parish, to chivy her into a domestic position. The officious churchwoman of whom Mrs. Proudie in *Barchester Towers* is the epitome and the caricature seems to be still in the future.

Mrs. Yorick certainly is in striking contrast to Fielding's Mrs. Adams, another fictional parson's wife of much the same period.

³ Irene Collins, *Jane Austen and the Clergy* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1994) 131.

⁴ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1932) 2:105–6.

In contrast to her unworldly husband, Mrs. Adams is practical to a fault; her practicality, perhaps combined with critical judgment, causes her to remove the sermons from her husband's saddle bags, although his purpose in going to London is to find a publisher for them. When Parson Adams goes looking for them, he finds instead "three Shirts, a pair of Shoes, and some other Necessaries, which Mrs. Adams, who thought her husband would want Shirts more than Sermons on his Journey, had carefully provided him."⁵ Her practicality is not without its theological application; hearing her husband counsel Joseph that he ought not to love Fanny over much, she breaks into the marriage preparation class to protest: "A Wife hath a Right to insist on her Husband's loving her as much as ever he can: and he is a sinful Villain who doth not. Doth he not promise to love her, comfort her, and to cherish her, and all that?" (244). She is able to combine her own experience with her understanding of the prayer book's intent in the same manner that Trim is able to translate the injunctions of the Ten Commandments into his care for his parents, an exercise in practical theology that wins Yorick's approbation. Mrs. Adams's practicality, however, finally overcomes both her theology and her sense of justice, for Lady Booby notes that her concern for her family makes her the lady's natural ally in preventing the marriage of Fanny and Joseph.

While Sean Gill challenges the assertion that eighteenth-century clerical wives were not as active as their Victorian successors, he provides very little evidence that the Rev. William Cole's ideal parson's wife, "visiting nowhere and taking care of her family concerns,"⁶ was not the norm. He represents the clergy wife's role primarily as setting an example to the flock, by running the household efficiently, looking after the children, and so on. Both he and Collins mention the work of clergy wives and their daughters in running Sunday Schools, but those institutions did not appear until the end of the eighteenth century, after Sterne's lifetime and therefore too late to be a possible activity for Mrs. Yorick. That a cleric's wife should assist her husband by attending to the farm in his absence and seeing to it that suitable substitute clergy were found

⁵ Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews, with Shamela and Related Writings*, ed. Homer Goldberg (New York: Norton, 1987) 72.

⁶ Quoted in Sean Gill, *Women and the Church of England: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London: SPCK, 1994) 58.

to take the services is no more than any responsible and effective wife would be expected to do in the period. Albinia Woodward's husband George describes her role as active both inside and outside the parsonage: she "managed the household and treated the poor for miles around with medicines of her own devising," in addition to which she was "a very good Divine ... which makes the reading of such books much more agreeable to me ... she makes herself the best companion to me, as well as the best of wives." Significantly, though, she was not expected to display her learning outside the home (Gill 59). In dispensing medicines, she was functioning not specifically as a parson's wife but as a gentlewoman, like Elizabeth Shackleton, a member of the Yorkshire gentry, who having inherited a recipe for rabies medicine from her first husband continued its production and sale after his death.⁷

Jane Austen's mother provides a similar model of clergy wife: her chief interests appear to have been her children and farming, and when her husband took in pupils to supplement his stipend she proved a capable and efficient mistress to the boarders.⁸ The parson's wives in Austen's fiction, for better or for worse, can be measured against this benchmark. Mary Crawford is disqualified in part because she values neither clerical orders nor conventional morality (she is shocked to hear that Edmund is to be ordained, and doesn't see why Maria has to be punished so severely for her elopement with Henry) and partly because she fails to understand the rural economy, whose concentration on getting the crops in makes it difficult for her to have her harp delivered. Fanny, on the other hand, displays her fitness for the job, first by the unstinting moral vision which has made her unpopular with readers ever since, and secondly by being "formed for domestic life, and attached to country pleasures."⁹

Nancy Woodforde, Parson Woodforde's niece, who lived with him as housekeeper and companion for more than twenty years, prepared meals, assisted him with tithing dinners and entertainments for the local clergy, kept bees, and raised a pig every year.

⁷ Amanda Vickery, *The Gentlewoman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998) 154.

⁸ Park Honan, *Jane Austen: Her Life* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996) 17–18.

⁹ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1934) 3:473.

That is not to say that she was completely detached from the church; when Parson Woodforde's declining health made it necessary for him to hire a curate, she reported back to him on the possible candidates. A Mr. Buckle who substituted at a service at Weston Church was entirely unsatisfactory: "Nancy says that Mr. Buckle was but an indifferent Reader and Preacher, she did not like him at all," but she approved of Mr. Hancock of Norwich who took the service for Mr. Corbould, the curate.¹⁰ Woodforde did expect her to be a participating communicant in the church—she took her communion for the first time in her life when she came to live with him—and his only complaints about her as a member of his parish concerned her absences from Sunday services.

Gill also mentions Susanna Wesley, whose life exemplifies the possibilities and limitations of a clerical wife, even an intelligent and capable one. Wesley's chief acclaim in her lifetime and since has come from her education of her nine children, to which she devoted six hours a day for twenty years. As long as her erudition and devotion to religion were kept within the home, her work was applauded. But a contretemps arose in the Epworth parsonage when her leadership of family prayers in her husband's absence became a public prayer service. Here again, it was the public nature of her actions, and not her leading her family in prayers, that caused the controversy. While her husband's letters have not survived, she lists his objections in her own, and her analysis of them is worth examining: "first, that it will look particular; secondly, my sex; and lastly, your being at present in a public station and character."¹¹ In other words, she was making a spectacle of herself. Her response to the second objection is particularly revealing of her understanding of the clergy wife's role:

I reply that as I am a woman, so I am also mistress of a large family. And though the superior charge of the souls contained in it lies upon you as head of the family and as their minister, yet in your absence I cannot but look upon every soul you leave

¹⁰ James Woodforde, *The Diary of a Country Parson*, ed. John Beresford, 5 vols (London: Oxford UP, 1926–1931) 4:318, 5:9–10.

¹¹ Susanna Wesley, *The Complete Writings*, ed. Charles Wallace, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 79.

under my care as a talent committed to me under a trust by the great Lord of all the families of heaven and earth. And if I am unfaithful to him or to you in neglecting to improve these talents, how shall I answer unto him when he shall command me to render an account of my stewardship? (Wesley 79)

Although the clergy were encouraged to look upon themselves as the fathers of their flock, the idea that a clergyman's wife is equally accountable for the souls under his care is a radical one, not accepted in her day, and probably not in ours either, even if the souls under discussion are restricted to the members of the rector's own household. In fact, because the number of people attending eventually swelled to about two hundred, many of whom were choosing to go to the parsonage in the evening rather than the parish church in the morning, it was disingenuous of her to suggest that she was merely reading to the children and her servants. Nonetheless, in reading prayers and a sermon, she was not overstepping the privileges of an unordained man, like a parish clerk, for example, or the male head of a household. At the end of her letter, she concludes that it is gender, not her husband's position or the fact that the services expanded beyond her own household, that is the difficulty, one that even she recognizes: "I do not speak of any concern I am under barely because so many are present, for those who have the honour of speaking to the great and holy God need not be ashamed to speak before the whole world, but because of my sex. I doubt if it be proper for me to present the prayers of the people to God" (Wesley 81).

Jeremy Gregory represents the role of the clergy wife as being an assistant and intellectual companion (in this last, citing the ubiquitous Albinia Woodward, as Gill does). She and the family supported the parson's work in many ways, "providing and distributing charity," and "developing a close relationship between clergy and parishioners."¹² Unfortunately, he provides neither specific examples nor much in the way of documentation. Certainly, Parson Woodforde's already close relationship with the Custances, the local squire and his wife, was strengthened by the friendship

¹² Jeremy Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation and Reform, 1660–1828: Archbishops of Canterbury and their Diocese* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) 170.

between Mrs. Custance and Nancy, and there is also evidence that Nancy got along with other clergy wives in the area. When she first arrived, however, he was concerned that she should be accepted, making some solicitous references to her treatment by the gentry and clergy in the neighbourhood, and noting the attention they paid to her: "Mrs. Custance asked for Nancy but Mr. Custance said nothing at all about her—which I think not right," and of company that arrives for dinner: "I was very glad to see him, as he and wife behaved very civil to Nancy" (Woodforde 1:288, 310). But there is little here or in what we know about Elizabeth Sterne or Mrs. Austen to suggest that they either dispensed charity or served as links between parson and parish, although it certainly makes sense that they should do so.

For this reason, W.M. Jacob's work is extremely helpful. While he is largely concerned with the lay people of the eighteenth-century, their expectations of the clergy are useful gauges. Lady Elizabeth Hastings's description of the ideal clergyman stated that he should "rule his own house well," thus enforcing the idea that the clergy household was chiefly valued as an exemplary model of Christian living.¹³ Jacob also provides evidence that the families of the clergy did indeed dispense charity. Mary Chapman, the widow of a Norwich clergyman who founded a charity school, herself founded a charity hospital and at her death in 1724 bequeathed her entire estate to support it. The preamble to the bequest, beginning, "whereas it hath pleased Almighty God to visit and afflict some of my nearest relations and kindred with lunacy, but he has hitherto blessed me with the use of my reason and understanding," suggests a personal connection with this particular charity, and in remembering the poor she indicates a method of thanksgiving (Jacob 180, 182). If, like Mrs. Yorick, whose great influence over the women of the congregation allowed her to effect the poor widow's acceptance as the village midwife, she too was able to influence the parishioners around her, she and her husband would have fulfilled the mandates of the Lady Elizabeth Hastings and Catherine De Bourghs of her area.

Mrs. Yorick's characterization, however it may deviate from what the record leads us to expect of clergy wives, deserves atten-

¹³ Quoted in W.M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 21.

tion because, unlike Fielding in his day or social historians in our own, and like Jane Austen, Sterne was living in the environment he describes, as vicar of a country parish church. What little we know about Laurence Sterne's life as a country parson indicates that Elizabeth Sterne, despite the record of marital discord, functioned as a clerical wife was expected to do. She also was concerned about the farm they bought, although, unlike the Austens and the Woodfordes, the Sternes were not successful farmers.¹⁴ She helped her husband with unspecified parish duties, and occasionally served as a witness to marriages (*EMY* 134). According to John Croft, from time to time she assisted Sterne in writing his sermons (*EMY* 217).¹⁵ However, one incident above all bears examination as a forerunner of Mrs. Yorick, although in this case Elizabeth was acting as a relative and not as a leader of the parish. In 1744, the Sternes were beset by Laurence's mother and sister who, assuming that his position as vicar meant that he was wealthier than he in fact was, left Ireland for England intending to profit by his good fortune. Elizabeth and Laurence attempted to set up Catherine, the sister, in either a mantua-maker's or a milliner's shop. While they agreed jointly to provide her with the necessary funds and training, the connections are clearly Elizabeth's: "Or if she Would go into a Milliners Shop in London, My Wife engaged not only to get her into a Shop where she should have Ten pounds a Year Wages, But to equip her with Cloaths &c.: properly for the Place: or lastly, if she liked it better, as my Wife had then an Opportunity of recommending her to the family of one of the first of our Nobility—she undertook to get her a creditable place in it where she would receive no less than 8 to 10 pds a Year Wages with other Advantages" (*EMY* 146). Unlike the poor widow, however, Catherine rejected the offer of help on the grounds that a daughter of a gentleman should not go out to service. This experience of an offer of a helping hand refused could well have suggested a happier scenario, transformed in the fiction into one where the Gentlewoman

¹⁴ Arthur H. Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years* (London: Methuen, 1975) 149. Hereafter *EMY*.

¹⁵ This information must not be taken at face value, since Croft is an unreliable witness whose stories about Sterne were generally meant to harm rather than enhance the latter's memory. Thus he is more likely attempting to indicate Sterne's own laziness than to suggest an Albinia Woodward role for Elizabeth.

has sufficient influence and the beneficiary sufficient gratitude to make the attempt successful. Significantly, in the novel the class distinction is broadened to make the relationship between agent and object of charity more tenable.

Perhaps the operative word in the description of Mrs. Yorick is not "parson's wife," but "Gentlewoman." It may be that in dispensing charity and organizing the affairs of the parish, Mrs. Yorick is functioning in her role as a member of the gentry, and not as the wife of the incumbent. The change in terms does not necessarily simplify the problem, of course. While the clergy and their families were considered gentry,¹⁶ the roles and possibilities for women generally in the Church of England are no clearer than those of the clerical wives specifically, although recent research has uncovered far more independent activity than previous assumptions would have held possible. That women could function as church wardens and overseers in the early eighteenth-century¹⁷ indicates that they could not have been as thoroughly confined to parlour and pew as an entirely patriarchal structure would suggest, given that the positions' responsibilities included the fiscal and physical well-being of the church and parish, financial liability, and even provision of communion wine and seeing that the roof was repaired. On the other hand, barriers certainly existed and continued to for centuries. When Mary Astell excluded "Pronunciation" from the syllabus of her proposed retreat for ladies, claiming that "Women have no business with the Pulpit, the bar or *St. Stephen's Chapel*,"¹⁸ she was not performing a renunciation but supporting the status quo. Preaching and litigating were not hers to renounce.

Amanda Vickery rejects the conventional public/private dichotomy, claiming that it is a terminology that the women she studied would not recognize or accept; she believes that when describing or categorizing the organization of their lives, these women "singled out their social and emotional roles" (10). The women about whom she writes would scoff at the suggestion that they were confined to a particular sphere; they were far too busy

¹⁶ See Vickery 17, 27, and Gregory, chapter 2, especially the section titled "Geographic, Social and Educational Backgrounds."

¹⁷ See Jacob 31.

¹⁸ Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997) 143.

traveling, writing, entertaining, and getting on with their lives generally. But some form of designation is necessary because they *were* restricted, as the lives (and complaints) of women like Susanna Wesley and Mary Astell demonstrate, and the restrictions were often related to discrimination between domestic and public activities. Despite the existence of the above-mentioned church-wardens, that discrepancy was regularly found in the church. Thus while mothers were expected to catechize their children, and clerical widows might catechize for pay in order to help out a busy parson, a priest who attempted to bring in a woman catechist, as a parish today would hire a Director of Christian Education, met with great opposition because his flock thought he was heading straight for Methodism.¹⁹ The woman preachers in Methodism were also a short-lived phenomenon, however, disappearing very soon after the death of John Wesley, at whose instigation they had begun preaching in the first place.

There was, however, one way in which women could serve the church in a professional capacity; the other woman in the scene with which I began this essay demonstrates that possibility. The midwife is clearly not a gentlewoman, but a member of the lower class, as the description of her implies: "a thin, upright, motherly, good old body of a midwife," (1:10), gentlewomen not usually being described as bodies, however motherly or upright. Her frank speech to Dr. Slop later in the book also reveals a direct rather than a genteel tongue, more suited to professional exchange than to drawing room conversation:

Pshaw! replied Dr. Slop, a child's head is naturally as soft as the paper of an apple;—the sutures give way,—and besides, I could have extracted by the feet after.—Not you, said she . . .

—And pray, good woman, after all, will you take upon you to say, it may not be the child's hip, as well as the child's head?—'Tis most certainly the head, replied the midwife. (3:220; 3:221)

¹⁹ See Jacob 101; Gregory 101.

Her career is hardly one Mrs. Yorick would have chosen for a gentlewoman, because the work of a midwife, like nursing, was generally left to the serving class. Yet she has clearly chosen well for this woman, who, at the time of Tristram's birth has "in the course of her practice of near twenty years in the parish, brought every mother's son of them into the world without any one slip or accident which could fairly be laid to her account" (1:50).

Given her clearly marked social standing, it is especially notable that she performs the one professional role permitted to women in the Church of England between the dissolution of the monasteries during the Reformation and the reestablishment of Anglican orders in the nineteenth century.²⁰ While during the eighteenth century the clergyman's wife's role was undefined, female catechists barely tolerated, and Anglican nuns and the order of deaconesses still in the future, the midwife was licensed by the church to be an agent of social and denominational control. The midwife's presence with the new mother in the "churching" pew during the ceremony of thanksgiving after childbirth confirms the idea of the midwife as an ecclesiastical official. While it could be argued that she was in attendance because the woman and her child might still be in need of her medical ministrations, her social role as guaranteeing the legitimacy of the child was also central. Because the midwife functioned as "in a sense, the servant of the bishop, from whom she had received her license to practice," an excommunicated woman might be denied her services, as one of the privileges of the church from which the excommunicant was barred.²¹

Modern interest in midwives generally concentrates on their role as medical practitioners; the controversy over the introduction of man midwives is important in medical history and women's studies, because of its implications for both medical advancement

²⁰ The chapter titles of Gill's book illuminate the changing roles for women in the church from the eighteenth century forward. The first chapter in the section on the eighteenth century is ominously titled "The Theology of Subordination," leading us to have rather low expectations for the contents of chapter 2, "Women, Church, and Society in Georgian England." "Full-time Church Workers" is chapter 7 of 10, coming towards the end of the section on the Victorian and Edwardian church, and indicative of how long it took women to reach that position.

²¹ N.J.G. Pounds, *A History of the English Parish: The Culture of Religion from Augustine to Victoria* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 297.

and women's control over their own bodies. They may also be studied for their symbolic role, as in Robert Erickson's study of the link between the figure of the midwife and the ancient archetype of the fates.²² In contrasting the female midwife's trust in Dame Nature with the accoucheur's reliance on scientific instruments, Sterne presents an accurate miniature of the controversy in the wider world. But the little vignette of the establishment of the midwife in the village through the agency of the parson and his wife is equally representative of contemporary reality. Midwives played a vital role in the social order, and their licensing by the church, and not by a governmental or medical body, is a sign of the circumstances under which that role was played. At the beginning of her 1671 guide to midwifery, Jane Sharp carefully situates her profession within a Judeo-Christian context. The necessary characteristics of a midwife are that she "be both fearing God, faithful, and exceeding well experienced in that profession." In support of her claim, she cites the story of the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who disobey the command of the Pharaoh to kill the Hebrew boys they deliver: "*But the Midwives feared God, and did not as the King of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive. Therefore God dealt well with the Midwives; and because they feared God, he made them Houses.*" Stepping back into the issues of her day, she claims that "the Holy Scriptures hath recorded Midwives to the perpetual honour of the female Sex. There being not so much as one word concerning *Men-midwives* mentioned there that we can find."²³

Sharp's editor, Elaine Hobby, provides evidence that Mrs. Yorick's scheme was not unique: while women were not supposed to be licensed as midwives until they had several years of internship as "deputy" midwives, "there are records of parishes arranging for poor widows to practice as midwives in order to make them financially independent." Like the woman Sterne describes, these women might well have children of their own, and have attended the deliveries of women in the community, although they would not necessarily have had formal training as midwives (Sharp

²² Robert A Erickson, *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Defoe, Richardson and Sterne) (New York: AMS Press, 1986).

²³ Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book, or the Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered*, ed. Elaine Hobby (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 11–12.

xiv). J.H. Aveling, writing in the nineteenth century, describes the frontispiece to the fourth edition of Sharp's text, which depicts a tripartite image: a woman being attended by the midwife after delivery, the procession to the church for the baptism, with the midwife in front carrying the child, and the christening party afterwards.²⁴ In contrast to this image of the midwife as an honoured official of the parish, his own frontispiece depicts the papist midwife, Elizabeth Cellier, sitting in the pillory, surely the public nadir of the profession in the seventeenth century. The oaths and licensing by which the midwives were bound, however, suggest that the first image is the expected one, which Jane Sharp and her successors sought to establish as typical.

The two sets of licensing documents Aveling provides, one from the sixteenth century and the other from the eighteenth, demonstrate the extent to which the oaths and licenses required of midwives were almost exclusively concerned with moral, religious, and social issues, as one would expect when the licensing agency is the church. In 1738, Elizabeth Chapman, a midwife in the Diocese of Rochester, promised to report suspicious (that is potentially illegitimate) births, to prevent women in childbirth naming the wrong father, to shun spells and charms in quelling pain (an attempt to eliminate popish, not occult, practices, although the general Protestant population tended to equate the two), to prevent Roman Catholic baptisms, and to behave modestly: "You shall be secret and not open in any matter appertaining to your office in the presence of any man, unless necessity or great urgent cause do constrain you so to do" (Aveling 90–94). Among the few items in the oath that are related to medical matters are that she attend equally to rich and poor, and that should she have difficulty in a birth, she should call in the assistance of other skilled midwives. By seeking Dr. Slop's advice, despite her obviously low opinion of his abilities, Sterne's midwife is following the dictates of her oath; by being a woman of few words, she indicates her suitability for the profession.

The parson and his wife in *Tristram Shandy* are particularly conscientious in making sure that the midwife is properly licensed, being in possession of both the real and corporal evidences of her

²⁴ James Hobson Aveling, *English Midwives, Their History and Prospects* (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1872) 50.

office, and not just recognized and accepted in her village. According to Aveling, licensing by the church was increasingly omitted as the eighteenth century progressed, and was completely dead by the early nineteenth century. Other medical practitioners such as physicians, surgeons and apothecaries, who had formerly been licensed by the ecclesiastical bodies, were subjected to secular licensing when church authority ceased but midwives were not; they slipped between the sacred and secular stools and ceased to be regulated at all (Aveling 152). His concern, in 1872, was not to reinstate the Church of England's role in midwifery, but to bring it under the control of the medical board, where he believed it ought to have been in the first place. Certainly, the lack of any medical concerns in the midwife's oaths is striking. Yet it is consonant with a society in which most social issues pertaining to the family (registration of marriages, births and deaths, determination of the legitimacy of children and thus the rights of inheritance, control over the legality of marriages and permission to divorce or separate) came under the purview of the established church, its clergy and other officials, and its courts. Baptismal registers contain entries for infants who were baptized by their midwives, an office they were licensed to take should the child be in danger of imminent death and a clergyman not readily available. Visitation records include questions about midwives: whether or not they were using charms, were being licensed officially, and were being trained to baptize infants *in extremis*, as the canons of the church required.

Because the Church of England's baptismal registers functioned as proof of both age and parentage, clearly its primary interest in licensing midwives was to ensure the accuracy of the record keeping. An occasion on which a baby girl was baptized "Robert," which occurred because the midwife was drunk and mistook the infant's gender, is an example of the kind of error that church officials were concerned to avoid. We know about the incident because it is inscribed in a baptismal register.²⁵ The requirement that the midwife report suspicious circumstances to the churchwardens is in keeping with the nature of welfare in the period, since the source of the handouts was determined by the needy person's parish of birth. There are records of pregnant women

²⁵ Aveling 6; W.E. Tate, *The Parish Chest: A Study of the Records of Parochial Administration in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1946) 59.

(including one in labor) being paid 2 pence to leave a parish, so that the infant's care (from birth throughout life to the eventual cost of burial) would not be charged to it (Pounds 198). The midwife's role as an agent of social order underlines how vital it is that Moll Flanders' Mother Midnight find an appropriately crooked practitioner, who won't ask prying questions about the whereabouts of the father, much less speak to the local authorities. Moll's search for gentlewoman's status would be set back considerably by a stint of public penance in the local parish church. And indeed, this midwife is an excellent choice, for, in flagrant disregard for her oath, the canny woman intends to protect Moll, who is apparently without a husband, from "the Parish Impertinences usual in such Cases," and to ignore her husbandless condition: "all the Ladies that came under her Care were married Women to her; every Woman . . . that is with Child has a Father for it, and whether that Father was a Husband or no Husband, was no Business of hers."²⁶ The Parish Officers would certainly have a different opinion of her business.

Mrs. Yorick's act of charity in finding honest work for a poor woman in her husband's parish, so transparent and normal to us, is a token of the divide between her society and our own. What appears natural to us—that the vicar's wife should function as an unofficial parish office in dispensing charity—was not necessarily the norm in her own; what seems strange to us—that a midwife should have to pay the ordinary for a license—was a standard aspect of eighteenth-century life. Certainly, if asked to list the typical roles of women in parish life in any century, most of us would be unlikely to name midwives, and would be far more likely to cite the parson's wife, whose work as an unpaid curate was a little-expected effect of the Reformation. Sean Gill's otherwise excellent history of women in the Church of England does not mention midwives at all. Yet what we may think of as the normative roles of women in the parish would not evolve for almost a century after the events at the beginning of *Tristram Shandy*. In that time, the expectations for clergy wives increased and the licensing of midwives ceased, until the balance shifted, and the managing clergy wife appeared at the same time as midwives' duties became exclu-

²⁶ Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, ed. G.A. Starr (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981) 163, 162.

sively medical. In the encounter between parson's wife and midwife, Sterne offers us a picture of women's parish work in his time and a glimpse of what it would become in the century after his death.