Workshop Title: Stepfamilies in Europe 1400 to 1800

Workshop Summary:
This session focuses on a comparative look at stepfamilies and blended family life across early modern Europe, with perspectives from a range of regions from northern Europe to the Mediterranean. Stepfamilies are families that evolved over time (embracing the conference theme of temporalities) as the remarriage of parents of both genders created complex families with stepparents, stepchildren, and the possibility of new half siblings. The sources used to study stepfamilies (genealogies, letters, life-writing, commemorative art work) connect the workshop to the theme of commemoration.

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Workshop Description:

This session addresses a significant gap in literature on the history of the family. Historians have studied family structure and household size, widows, and remarriage rates and patterns, but these studies have not followed through to understand the consequences of remarriage on the formation of a new family encompassing parent, stepparent, stepchildren, and the possibility of new half-siblings. Part of a proposed collection of essays by the same title, our session draws on a wide variety of sources to study stepfamilies across Europe from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean and from a variety of religious traditions.

Stepfamilies are, by their very nature, families that are evolving over time, connecting the session directly to the conference theme of “Temporalties.” Studying stepfamilies in early modern Europe allows us to explore how men, women, and children experienced time within the life of one or more families. Men and women might mark time by their experiences of multiple marriages. Death and remarriage meant that over the life course an adult could become a spouse, widow or widower, single parent, and then once again a spouse with the possibility of repeating the cycle. The same pattern of remarriage moved children from their original family unit to new family groupings that often expanded the numbers of their siblings.

The session draws on an array of source material that allows us to examine both the theory and practice of life within a stepfamily. The institutions of early modern Europe (magistrates, pension structures, and overseers of poor relief schemes) often struggled with the complexities produced by remarriage and could react with rhetoric that attempted to deny its reality. However, there is also some evidence of a practical flexibility on the part of early modern institutions that allowed widowed mothers to retain guardianship after remarriage or widowed stepparents to continue to care for their stepchildren. Early modern literature often presents an image of the “evil stepmother,” but as scholars we are still exploring how the literary images of stepfamilies recorded in dramas, fairy tales, and proverbs interacted with the reality of people’s daily lives as represented in wills, marriage contracts, and court records. Family portraits and funeral monuments also portray remarried spouses and their children in ways that depict the complexity of these families.

We propose to introduce the stepfamilies we are studying through group discussion of our visual and legal sources in the context of some secondary work. Lyndan Warner of St. Mary’s University analyzes stepfamilies in France and the Southern Low Countries, where she draws on visual resources, legal records, and correspondence to study the relationships created in families blended together after remarriage. Grace Coolidge of Grand Valley State University studies families in Spain with a focus on illegitimate children and their role within the complex early modern family. She draws mostly on wills and other legal documents and often examines families through the lens of inheritance. The contrast in our areas of focus and our source material gives the session its comparative emphasis, and Lyndan Warner’s rich examples of portraits of stepfamilies provide a place to start the group discussion. We
propose the following questions to begin an examination of the complex realities of early modern families:

• What kind of kinship networks were available to stepfamilies? Did “blending” a family limit or expand the social, economic, and especially emotional support networks available for their support? How do we, as scholars, go about uncovering those networks?
• What were the emotional implications of a blended family? Since early modern blended families often came about after the death of one or more parent, and infant mortality rates were notoriously high during this time period, how did issues of death, memory, and commemoration affect the bonds of the new stepfamily?
• How did families represent complex family relationships formed through death and remarriage (and illegitimacy) in commissioned portraits and funerary monuments or private family records? Which parents, spouses, stepparents, siblings, stepsiblings and half-siblings were included and who was omitted?
• What was the role played by the stepfather? Once the widowed mother remarried a new partner who became the male head of household, did the stepfather wield the same authority as the deceased father? Were a stepfather’s actions more regulated by local magistrates, by customary laws, by the concerns of the deceased husband’s kin?
• How did the reality of the blended family compare or contrast with literary or visual representations of it? In what ways did literature and art affect how people viewed their own families? Did images like that of the wicked stepmother make life more difficult for remarried women?
• How did blended families interact with inheritance practices? Families across the social scale struggled with the distribution of resources. The nobility worried about lineage, conservation of property, power, and titles, and families from further down the social scale worried about conserving scarce resources for survival. How did these concerns affect stepfamilies who were often inheriting either resources or debts from several different family structures?
• Legal stepfamilies were not the only way a family could be complex in early modern Europe. How did the presence of illegitimate half-siblings complicate households that may have already consisted of siblings, legitimate half-siblings, and stepsiblings? Are long-term liaisons that occurred outside of marriage and produced multiple children the equivalent of stepfamilies?

Reading List:
• Visual materials include a printed broadside, a printed funeral sermon, a family group portrait, a funerary monument, a hand-written genealogy, a religious painting
• Short excerpt from Juan Roque Zavala’s petition for legitimacy in 1728 before the Council of Castile. Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Sección Consejos, legajo 2288, no 47. Transcribed and translated by Grace E. Coolidge
• Short excerpts from the Duke of Sexto’s will regarding his legitimate children and their four illegitimate half-siblings. Toledo, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Sección Nobleza, Osuna, c. 130, d. 65-68, transcribed and translated by Grace E. Coolidge.


**Suggested Further Reading List**


English Aristocratic Women, 1450–1550

Marriage and Family, Property and Careers

Barbara J. Harris

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2002

The marriage of Henry VIII's Privy Chamber, and his third was the earl. The match was highly advantageous to both parties, as Henry's marriage to Jane Seymour brought him the title of earl, and Jane gained the throne of England.

The marriage of Arthur, Duke of Norfolk, and his second wife was arranged by the matchmaker, because she was a close relative of the Duke of Norfolk. This marriage was arranged by the Duke of Norfolk's sister, who was the matchmaker. The matchmaker was a woman named Elizabeth, who was known for her matchmaking skills.

Another potential advantage of remarriage was that aristocratic women were often required to perform certain religious duties, such as the performance of certain religious ceremonies, and these duties could be fulfilled by the remarriage of a woman. This was particularly useful for women who were widowed or who had no sons, as they could then perform these duties without having to marry again.

Overall, the practice of remarriage by aristocratic women was a common occurrence, and it was often arranged by matchmakers. These women were required to perform certain religious duties, and remarriage was a way for them to fulfill these duties without having to marry again. Remarriage was also a way for women to gain status and influence within the nobility.
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English Garrison Women, 1695–1715

...
enough. The water and mud are beginning to dry out. The sun is high in the sky, and the heat is intense. The air is filled with the sweet fragrance of flowers, and the birds are singing. The ducks are swimming in the water, and the children are playing nearby. The sound of their laughter fills the air. The water is shallow, and the children are enjoying themselves. The sun is now setting, and the sky is painted with hues of orange and pink. The children are now running home, their faces flushed with excitement. They have had a wonderful day at the beach.
CHAPTER 8: BEYOND

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

THE HOUSEHOLD

PATRONAGE AND POWER

English Aristocratic Women, 1650-1960

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Excerpts from the Duke of Sexto’s will (dated 1718) regarding his legitimate children and their four illegitimate half-siblings. Toledo, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Sección Nobleza, Osuna, c. 130, d. 65-68, transcribed and translated by Grace E. Coolidge.

The Duke of Sexto was a widower with six legitimate children, five of whom were of age in 1718 when he wrote his will. He had been serving in Italy for several years where he had also apparently fathered four illegitimate children. The following are excerpts from his will as he dealt with his two different families (comprising ten children in total).

“I declare that during the many years that I was single and absent from home, occupied by the military affairs of my profession, with too much liberty [given] to natural inclinations, I had some pleasures and communications with diverse women, all of them single and free to marry and of good reputation, which communication has resulted in [my] having different children . . . it is my necessary and inexcusable obligation to leave [these children] funds for their support while I can, and when I cannot, [the obligation passes] to my son and successor . . .”

“Declaro que en los muchos años que he estado soltero y ausente de mi casa ocupado en los (repercudos?) empleos militares donde su profesion se manjua con demasiada libertad en los naturales inclinaciones he tenido algunos divertimentos y comunicaciones con diferentes mugeres, todas libres y solteras y conocida calidad, de cuia comunicacion ha resultado tener diferentes hixos . . . a los cuales, siendo como es obligacion precisa e ynexcusable en mi dejarles alinentos precisos para su sustento si pudiere, y quando no, en my hijo y sucesor . . .”

The duke stated that he was confident that his heir, the next duke of Sexto, would take on this obligation “For your love and tenderness as much as for your interest in your reputation and your noble status, and because these children are your brothers and sisters and children of mine, they cannot go begging or live without what is necessary, so I charge you to have them under your protection and to help and assist them . . .”

“por su amor y cariño como por lo que se interesa su reputacion y Grandeza, en que estos ninos por naturaleza hermanos tuyos y hijos mios no anden mendigando ni precisado vivir sin lo preciso para manteners y antes . . . le pido y en cargo y a todos mis susesores los tomen y reavan y bajo su proteccion y los ayuden, asisten . . .”
Excerpt from Juan Roque Zavala’s petition for legitimacy in 1728 before the Council of Castile. Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Sección Consejos, legajo 4488, no 47. Transcribed and translated by Grace E. Coolidge.

Don Juan Roque Zavala (from Badajoz) was the son of Don Juan Baptista Zavala, an accountant and member of the artillery. After his first wife died, Don Juan Baptista Zavala had an affair with one of her ladies-in-waiting, Doña María Saenz. Doña María gave birth to a son (Juan Roque Zavala), but Don Juan Baptista Zavala married another woman, Doña Juana de Auñon, with whom he had four more children. In 1728 Don Juan Roque Zavala petitioned the Council of Castile to be legitimated, and he presented the following testimony from his legitimate half-brother, Don Miguel de Zavala, son of Don Juan Baptista Zavala and his second wife, Doña Juana de Auñon. The testimony suggests some of the ways in which illegitimacy could create a situation that very much resembled a step-family.

“Don Juan Baptista de Zavala, father of the witness (who is Don Miguel de Zavala) did not declare the said don Juan Roque as his illegitimate son (which he was) out of consideration for Doña Juana de Auñon with whom he had four children or, which is more certain, to protect the reputation of the said Doña María Saenz who was living in the respect of her relations who were ignorant of what had happened. But he (the witness) knows that Don Juan Baptista communicated with Licensiado Francisco Sanchez Salquero, priest of the sacred Cathedral of Badajoz who was his confessor [and told him] what was to be given to Don Juan Roque, his illegitimate son. He mandated in his will that he had given the said [Don Juan Roque] four thousand reales in order that he [the confessor] could communicate this. And the said priest Francisco Sanchez Salquero expressed to Doña Juana de Auñon that the aforementioned four thousand reales were for the care of the said Don Juan Roque. Doña Juana de Auñon, with his agreement, resolved to bring the said Don Juan Roque to the house, considering that being the son of her husband if [after] this four thousand reales was spent it was necessary to assist [him] with more or recognize him, then it was her assumption that bringing him into the household when don Juan Baptista Zavala died [would help]. Even if she didn’t raise him with the name of being her husband’s son, nor did her children call him brother, the possibility could exist from their inclinations and behaviors. Everything depended on his intentions and if he did not act accordingly it would put his case in doubt. She left telling the whole truth to her children until they were older, but once the said Don Juan Roque was grown and especially since his marriage, he showed samples of his intentions which corresponded with the esteem for him. And his siblings, children of the said Don Juan Baptista de Zavala and of the said Doña Juana de Auñon, knowing him for the said illegitimate son of their father recognized him as such and his nephews and nieces in the presence of his siblings called the said Don Juan Roque de Zavala uncle . . .”

“Don Juan Baptista de Zavala padre del declarante no declaro por hijo natural a dicho don Juan Roque como lo hera o por la atencion que quiso tener a Doña Juana de Auñon de quien tenia quatro hijos or lo que mas cierto es por el credito de la dicha Doña María Saenz que bivia estimada de sus parentescos que ignoravan lo sucedido pero save el
declarante que comunica con el Liciado Francisco Sanchez Salguero, cura del sagriño
de la Cathedral de Badajoz que era su confesor lo que se ava de disponer del dicho Don
Juan Roque su hijo natural y mando en su testamento se entregasen a disposicion del dicho
cura cuatro mil reales para lo que le tenia comunicado y hasiendo expresado el dicho
cura Francisco Sanchez Salguero a Doña Juana de Auñon que los quatro mil reales
referidos eran para la crianza del dicho Don Juan Roque con acuerdo del dicho resolvio
Doña Juana de Auñon madre del declarante traer a casa el dicho Don Juan Roque
considerando que siendo hijo de su marido si se gastavan estos quatro mil reales era
presiso después de acavados o asistile con mas o reconoclo (?) entonces en cuyo
supuesto se lo trajo a casa luego que murio dicho don Juan Bauptista Zavala y aun que no
le crio con el nombre de hijo de su marido ni sus hijos le trataban con título de hermano
por la contingencia que podia aver en sus yncilinaciones y procederes y para si estas no
fuesen correspondientes poder dejar en duda este caso no por eso dejo de desir a sus hijos
siendo y a grandes toda la verdad de este subieso pero después de cresido dicho Don Juan
Roque fue dando muestras de su obrar y especialmente desde que se caso hizo de el la
estimacion correspondiente y la misma a hecho el que declara y los de mas hermanos
suyos hijos de dicho Don Juan Bauptista de Zavala y de la dicha Doña Juana de Auñon
conosiendole por tal hijo natural de su padre como lo a credita el llamarle en su presencia
los sobrinos de el que declara hijos de sus hermanos tio al dicho Don Juan Roque de
Zavala . . ."
Stepfamilies in Europe, 1400-1800

Grace Coolidge & Lyndan Warner

Representations of stepfamilies in

- a printed broadside
- a printed funeral sermon
- a family group portrait
- a religious painting
- a funerary monument
- a hand-written genealogy
Print of a ‘family riddle’ drawn from a 1576 painting in the town hall of Nijmegen, Netherlands, printed by Abraham van Wesel, 1698
A young woman has an old man lying in her lap while six sons stand near to the couple – two sons in red, two sons in green, two sons in white

The wife with the old man speaks:
Mark well what I have to say:
The two dressed in red are my father’s brothers,
The two in green are my mother’s brothers,
The two in white are my own children. And I [their] mother,
Have the father of these six men for my husband,
The kinship [consanguinity] does not prevent [our marriage]

The two sons dressed in red say:
It’s true that it might harm to remain secret
That our niece was given [in marriage] to our father:
Because she is not our father’s niece,
Although no-one would easily guess it.

The two in green say:
It is a wonder to note in this engraving
Because he is our father by nature,
And he married our niece.
But still, we do not regret it.

The two in white say:
The old man is father to all of us,
The young lady is mother to the two of us,
But tell us, how can it come [to be]
That our brothers are our mother’s uncles?

*nota bene, I have not translated the answer to the riddle, we’ll do that at the workshop, if no one can solve the riddle!
MORITZ, LANDGRAVE OF HESSE-KASSEL (b.1572-d.1632) and his first wife AGNES OF SOLMS-LAUBACH (b.1578-d.1602) with the 4 surviving children of the first marriage bed. From left to right: OTTO, MAURITIUS, WILHELMUS, ELISABETHA. A foldout print from the funeral work Monumentum Sepulcrale, ad Illustrissimi Celsissimique Principis ac Domini, Dn. Mavritii Hassiae Landgravy ... Memoriam Gloriae Sempiternam Erectum (Cassellis: Ammonius, 1640) fos 20-21. Jacob van der Heyden, engraver, after a painting by August Erich. Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, permalink: http://diglib.hab.de/drucke/gm-4f-442-1/start.htm
Moritz, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel (b. 1572-d. 1632) and his second wife Juliana of Nassau-Siegen (b. 1587-d. 1643) with their 14 children posed between them. From left to right, Philippus, Hermannus, Mauritius, Fredericus, Christianus, Ernestus, Philippus, Christina, Elisabetha, Magdalena, Sabina, Sophia, Juliana, Agnes. A foldout print in Monumentum Sepulcrale, ad Illustriissimi Celsissimique Principis ac Domini, Dn. Mavritii Hassiae Landgrave ... Memoriam Glorii Sempiternam Erectum, c. 1640, fos 34-5. Jacob van der Heyden, engraver after a painting by August Erich. Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, permalink: http://diglib.hab.de/drucke/gm-4f-442-1/start.htm

From left to right: ENGEL DE RUYTER (b. 1649-d. 83) son of Michiel de Ruyter’s 2nd wife Neeltje Engels, MICHEL DE RUYTER, b. 1607-d. 1676, Anna van Gelder, 3rd wife, b. 1614-d. 73, JAN PAUWELZ VAN GELDER, b. 1647-d. 73, Anna’s son by 1st husband, ALIDA DE RUYTER, b. 1642-d. 79, daughter of Michiel de Ruyter’s 2nd wife Neeltje Engels, MARGARIETE, b. 1652-d. 88, daughter of Michiel and his 3rd wife Anna van Gelder, grandson CORNELIS DE WITTE, b. 1660-d. 1701, ANNA DE RUYTER, b. 1655-d. 66, daughter of Michiel and his 3rd wife Anna van Gelder, JOHAN DE WITTE, b. 1635-d. 83, son-in-law of Michiel, father of Cornelis, and husband to CORNELIA DE RUYTER, b. 1639-d. 1720, eldest child of daughter of Michiel de Ruyter’s 2nd wife Neeltje Engels.
The three remarriages of ANNE – mother of Virgin Mary, grandmother of Jesus – created the ‘Holy Blended Family’ of half-siblings

Back row: CLEOPHAS (Anne’s 2nd husband), JOSEPH (Mary’s husband), SAINT ANNE, JOACHIM (1st husband, father of Virgin Mary), SALOME (Anne’s 3rd husband)

Centre: VIRGIN MARY with JESUS on her lap.

Left: Family cluster – ALPHEUS (son-in-law), married to MARY CLEOPHAS, daughter of Anne’s 2nd marriage, with their 4 sons JAMES THE MINOR, JOSEPH THE JUST, SIMON AND JUDAS

Right: Family cluster – MARY SALOME, daughter of Anne’s 3rd marriage, with ZEBEDEE her husband and their 2 sons JAMES THE MAJOR and JOHN THE EVANGELIST

Lorenzo Fasolo, *The Family of the Virgin*, Savona, Italy, 1513, 202 cm x 144cm
Paris: Musée du Louvre INV.352
Funerary brass of the wool merchant Geoffrey Dormer, d. 9 March 1502/3, flanked by his first wife Margery and his second wife Alice Collingridge, d. 1513

Margery had 5 sons and 8 daughters while Alice had 7 sons and 5 daughters for 25 children in total.

Brass Rubbing: Geoffrey Dormer, Margery, and Alice (1982.05.0011), Spurlock Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 170cm x 96 cm/ Rex Harris, Flickr
A record of the children of the first & second marriages born to
**Catherine de Mepsche**, written by her second husband
**Antoine de Locquenghien** (stepfather and father), late
1500s, early 1600s, Brussels, Belgium
A History of Stepfamilies in Early America

Lisa Wilson

The University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill
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Stepfamilies founded our nation. George Washington, the Father of Our Country, was a stepfather. When he married a young widow, Martha (Dandridge) Custis, in 1759, he took on her two small children, Jackie, six, and Patsy, four. When seventeen-year-old Patsy lay gravely ill with tuberculosis, her stepfather prayed at her bedside for her recovery. Jackie, at times a challenging teenager, stood at his stepfather’s side when the British surrendered at Yorktown, though he died soon thereafter. Washington then offered to raise Jackie’s two youngest children.¹

The only portrait of the first, first family, titled The Washington Family, appears to depict a first-marriage family with children, and yet the Washington family was another kind of “traditional” American family altogether, a stepfamily. Edward Savage painted a large canvas of the domestic scene between 1789 and 1796. Washington displayed a print of the image in his dining room at Mount Vernon. Numerous copies were made of this popular painting for sale. The children are George Washington’s step-grandchildren: George “Washy” Washington, Parke Custis, and Eleanor “Nelly” Parke Custis. Washington sits relaxed with his arm resting on his step-grandson’s shoulder. His step-granddaughter stands by her grandmother with William Lee, one of Washington’s slaves, in the background. Washington proudly sits in his military uniform looking over the plans of the new city of Washington while a view of Mount Vernon serves as a backdrop.² He is the quintessential slave master, plantation owner, military leader, husband, and step-grandfather. In other words, he appears as the patriarch of a family he has not sired. The first, first family was a stepfather family.

Washington was not the only founder who was part of a stepfamily. Benjamin Franklin was the child of a second marriage. The audacious young man ran away from his apprenticeship with his half brother, printer James Franklin, convinced he could open a print shop of his own in Philadelphia.³ President James Madison was stepfather to John Payne Todd, Dolley’s child by her first husband, and Madison’s Virginia plantation was sold in part to pay off Todd’s gambling debts.⁴ Paul Revere, a widower with eight children,
married Rachel Walker, who bore him eight more children. These men and women were the founding stepfathers, stepmothers, and stepchildren of the United States.

Unlike today, death, not divorce, defined early American stepfamilies. Divorce, although not unknown in colonial America, was exceedingly rare, and remarriage was often not legally permitted. One author from that era defined stepfamilies as “families in which death has made a breach, and which have been re-constructed.” The English language itself reflects the connection between stepfamilies and death. In Old English, ástipéd, the word from which the prefix “step” is derived, means “bereavement.” A stéop-bear, or stepchild, was a bereaved child. A stepfather or stepmother, therefore, was the parent of a child in mourning. Losing a parent (or a spouse) blazed the trail to remarriage as well as stepfamily formation.

In addition, the frequency of death in early America guaranteed that everyone was in or knew someone who was in a stepfamily of one sort or another. At a time before effective birth control, remarriage almost always led to the creation of a stepfamily. And many people remarried. Studies of various locations in early modern Europe and North America have found that between 20 and 40 percent of marriages were remarriages. Although the popular assumption is that many women died in childbirth, leaving more grieving men looking for new partners, these numbers are not as high as might be expected. Men also died young as a result of illness, injury, and warfare. More widowed women than men remained single, mitigating any childbirth-induced imbalance between the numbers of stepfathers and of stepmothers. All in all, these demographic realities assured that both families with stepmothers and those with stepfathers were a common part of the landscape.

Stepfamilies also were ubiquitous because they were necessary. Families were essentially nuclear in the parts of northwestern Europe from which many white colonists had come. The couple was central to the proper functioning of these families. Europeans re-created these family patterns in colonial North America as soon as demographic realities allowed. An intense focus on the couple made this kind of family brittle in the face of the loss of one parent. The death of a partner created a void that needed to be filled in some way so that the family could continue to function. The surviving parent could hire a servant or ask an older child to step in, but remarriage was the only permanent solution. Without two adults to run a household, this kind of nuclear family structure could simply collapse, with children farmed out to service and the remaining adult taking up residence in a relative’s home or a boardinghouse.

Despite being both common and necessary, stepfamilies were paradoxically the subjects of ridicule. Prejudice against this family form has roots that stretch a long way back in time. In eighteenth-century northwestern Europe and America, prejudice against stepfamilies found a new life as the Enlightenment took hold. A foil for these ancient prejudices developed in the form of the ideal “sentimental” family. Writers described this kind of family as an affectionate unit based on companionsate marriage and centered on children raised with love and constant attention. In addition, the members of the rising middle class in northwestern Europe began to define themselves in part by the homes they created. For the new bourgeoisie, a proper family was a sentimental one. Middle-class remarrying couples also sought this kind of family. Although burdened by prejudice, stepmothers, stepfathers, and stepchildren struggled to re-create a proper Enlightenment home despite traditional stereotypes that predicted their failure.
Beyond the white middle-class, other groups—the majority of people in early America—had different concerns and in some cases more successful approaches to the loss of a spouse. Native, African, and African-descended peoples mitigated the impact of death on a surviving spouse and children in a number of ways. A matrilineal structure, polygyny, and extended families all provided support for grieving families in a way that nuclear households did not. For example, matrilineal families included other women who could take on tasks in the absence of a wife and mother. These female-related groups lived close together or even (as with the Iroquois) in the same household. The practice of polygyny also provided an alternate maternal presence for bereft children. Extended families could likewise help to close the gap left when a spouse died. Even as many native people were forced to give up their land and required to live in nuclear households over the eighteenth century, the extended family endured. Most African (forced) migrants left behind elaborate kin networks but quickly worked to re-constitute them. Some even began this process with their shipmates during the middle passage. Slavery interfered with family development through gender imbalance and limited mobility. Slaves also could not legally marry. Slaves on large plantations and free people nonetheless worked to re-create family systems in keeping with African patterns. When possible, polygyny was also practiced. Both the Native American and African American responses to spouse loss proved more successful than the stepfamily strategies of their Anglo-American neighbors.

Likewise, the struggle of white middle-class, American stepfamilies had little relevance to the families of the poor of all ethnicities. Households in early American communities formed to facilitate financial survival as much as familial preferences. Strangers and family members shared residences out of necessity. Nuclear families, even if they were ideal, were hard to maintain. Marriage itself was beyond the means of many people, and partnerships often formed with no official records. Also, for such “mates” struggling to keep afloat, the ideal of companionsate marriage was likely not a central preoccupation when the death of a parent or spouse rocked a household.

In sum, we need to think of the “traditional” American family in new ways. Race, ethnicity, and class all are factors in the equation, but even the much studied American middling sorts exhibited family diversity. Stepfamilies were also “traditional.” In addition, the roots of modern stepfamily stereotypes and prejudices reside firmly in early America’s white middle-class struggle with cultural imperatives. Modern prejudice must be seen in light of the experiences of these founding stepfamilies.

Despite or perhaps because of stepfamilies’ ubiquity, historians have all but ignored the unique experience of such families in the American past. Most scholars have simply folded stepfamily stories into a broader narrative of family life, while others have assumed that these families were different from “regular” families but were likely riddled with conflict, particularly when a stepmother was involved. For example, according to Peter Laslett, among English families, “The stepmother and her evil influence is so conspicuous a feature of the fairy tales and of the literature as a whole that it seems to correspond to something important in the lives of those who repeated them.” Similarly, historian of British North America Helena M. Wall notes, “People expected stepparents to cause problems, and their anxieties must have been as least in part self-fulfilling.” Such statements demand further analysis.

Toward this end, when looking at experience rather than cultural perception, I focus on the much mythologized region of New England for a number of reasons. First, more has been written about the New England family than any other family system in colonial America, meaning that a great deal of scholarship undergirds this study. Second, abundant archival resources survive for this region, providing the evidence needed to pursue this topic. Third, the regional interest in genealogy has helped make these abundant resources accessible. In fact, genealogical material of all kinds, especially the digitalized resources available through the New England Historical and Genealogical Society, literally enabled me to find early America's stepfamilies.

In addition, the only other study of stepfamilies in early North America is an article focused on the seventeenth-century Chesapeake, where the high death rate produced a world of multiple marriages, numerous stepfamilies, and powerful widows. Late colonial and early national New England was a less crisis-driven environment, with unusually low mortality rates, at least until the land filled in the eighteenth century. Stepfamilies were, therefore, common but not ubiquitous. In addition, the region featured relatively mature eighteenth-century provincial villages, towns, and cities, whereas the Chesapeake constituted a colonial frontier where life was more of a struggle and the hazards were deadlier.

Finally, the people of New England were highly literate. Readers regularly bought and borrowed books, periodicals, newspapers, and other materials. A flourishing publishing industry gave New Englanders regular access
choose to take on the role and act in loco parentis. In the end, marrying a widow with children gave a man financial power, few obligations, and the freedom to act the hero or the scoundrel, as his character and circumstances led him. Precautions against the worst case seemed prudent, leading to a complicated legal world that I explore using the story of one man who worked the law to his advantage.

Chapter 3 explores the roots and development of prejudices against stepmothers. The unique American iteration of stepmother wickedness was the character of Step-mother England. The former mother country had not remarried by the time of the American Revolution; rather, she had morphed into an evil counterfeit, a stepmother country who was cruel to her colonial children. Early modern European caricatures focused on stepmothers as evil women. Like witches and scolds, they turned the world upside-down, even turning a father against his own children. As the eighteenth century ushered in new ideas about sentimental family life, these evil characterizations were joined by stories comparing idealized mothers with demonized stepmothers. The stepmother became the personification of a cruel mother, the opposite of the new mother of the rising middle class. One kind of evil stepmother did not replace the other; instead, new stories were layered on top of old. Wicked and often murderous stepmothers were joined by the emotionally abusive and neglectful stepmothers of the eighteenth century.

Chapter 4 looks at three families to find some common themes and differing responses to flesh-and-blood stepmothers. The children in stepmother families understood cultural prejudices and compared their stepmothers to their angelic dead mothers. In some instances, these comparisons overwhelmed children's ability to open their hearts to another woman; in other cases, children found ways to welcome new mothers into their lives. Regardless, stereotypes influenced the journey to becoming a stepparent.

Sibling relationships within stepfamilies, the subject of chapter 5, proved that blood was not always thicker than water. Brothers and sisters often made common cause despite inheritance laws, which predicted conflict. When a parent died, siblings often worked together for the good of the family. Fiction of the period recommended and reflected the possibility of success in sibling interactions in stepfamilies. Brothers and sisters—full, half, and step—got along or fought but did not always do so along expected lines.

Stepmothers and their families finally found some public sympathy and concern in the antebellum age of reform, the subject of chapter 6. In children's literature and women's magazines, the good stepmother appeared as a counterweight to the longtime reina of the wicked stepmother. A good
stepmother could become a new mother, raising her stepchildren with the memory of their mother intact. Children and stepmothers could be taught to get along. The importance of having a mother in a middle-class family overcame the ancient prejudice against stepmothers, making them the ideal replacement, preferable to servants or overextended relatives. Remarriage for men was a positive good and a loving gesture toward children. Although this moment passed, the possibility existed for a more open-minded approach to stepmothers and their families before the Civil War.

Prejudice against stepfamilies still influences our thinking in the modern period. Today, divorce rather than death creates most stepfamilies. Despite the potential for increased animosity in the face of marital discord, the prejudice against stepfamilies looks strangely familiar. As I outline in the epilogue, stepfathers, now seen as more of a physical than financial threat, still struggle with cultural suspicion. Stepmothers are still doing battle with fairy tales. Children are still seen as potential victims. Letting go of our long-held prejudices has proved difficult. Perhaps this study can help provide the historical context to help reexamine these stubborn cultural assumptions.

In January 1786, Boston lawyer and politician James Sullivan found himself with seven children, wracked with grief, and loath to lean on his fifteen-year-old daughter. His wife had just died. Lying next to her corpse, Sullivan wrote to a friend, "For the space of nine hours illness the skill of physicians was exhausted in vain attempts to save a life dear to many, but infinitely so to me and her seven children." He worked hard to appear strong for his children, but "a life of gloominess and anxiety now awaits; and had I not now the double charge of these orphans, my earnest prayer would be to go down with her to the silent tomb." Three months later, Sullivan wrote, "My dear children demand much from me, and deserve every thing—I am obliged to appear quite otherwise than I am, to keep up their spirits." James Sullivan found a permanent solution to his problem in the person of Martha (Langdon) Simpson, a widow whom he married before the year had ended.

Love and money entered the calculations of most eighteenth-century couples contemplating marriage, but widows and widowers had some unique needs. Widows with property worried about their dead husbands' estates, since remarriage would mean that new husbands would assume ownership of the women's property. Accordingly, a cautious widow who did not need the support of a husband might feel no hurry to remarry and might not choose to do so at all. Widowers, conversely, felt pressure to retie the knot to provide their children with replacement mothers. By the end of the eighteenth century, for the middling sort, the quality of this care became central. Sentimental middle-class norms of the time required child-centered parenting directed by a loving mother rather than a simple caregiver.
INTRODUCTION


10. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich suggests that deaths in childbirth were lower in rural New England than comparable areas in England and much lower than in the cites of Dublin and London. In the diary of the early Maine midwife that she studied, five or six deaths occurred per one thousand births, numbers comparable to early twentieth-century rates in the United States. See Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812 (New York: Knopf, 1990), 172–73. Roger Schofield suggests that maternal mortality rates have been exaggerated for early modern England and that women were just as likely to die from other causes. See Roger Schofield, "Did the Mothers Really Die? Three Centuries of Maternal Mortality in "The World We Have Lost,"" in The World We Have Lost: Histories of Population and Social Structure, ed. Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith, and Keith Wrightson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 231–60. In addition, colonial North America was in a constant state of war prior to the revolution, increasing the death rate for young men. For the implications of Kirt Philp’s War for family life, see Ricketson, "To Be Young, Poor, and Alone."
 Differences between Theory and Practice," in Marriage and Remarriage, ed. Popaquer et al, 48. Margaret Pelling found very few spouseless men in Norwich, England, before 1700, which she interprets as evidence of virtually universal remarriage for men ("Finding Widowers: Men without Women in English Towns before 1700," in Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner [Harlow: Longman, 1991], 50–61). Barbara J. Todd, looking at Abington, traces widows through their deaths or remarriages and concludes that between 14.6 percent and 50 percent remarried between 1540 and 1710 ("Demographic Determinism and Female Agency: The Remarrying Widow Reconsidered ... Again," Continuity and Change 9 [December 1994]: 433). Demos has said that for both men and women, marriage within a year and often within six months of the death of a spouse was common in seventeenth-century Plymouth, Massachusetts; however, such was not the case in the more settled communities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Little Commonwealth, 61). A study of eighteenth-century widows in Woburn, Massachusetts, finds that women remarried an average of 5.2 years after the death of their husbands (Keyssar. "Widowhood in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," 93). In early nineteenth-century Newburyport, Massachusetts, men remarried more quickly than women—on average, 5.5 years for widows and 1.3 years for widowers (Grigg, "Toward a Theory of Remarriage"). In eighteenth-century New France, New England's northern neighbor, Molly G. Richter has found that men remarried more quickly than women ("Widowhood in New France: Consequences and Coping Strategies," French Colonial History 4, no. 1 (2003): 49–69). In general, remarriage intervals in northwestern Europe between the eighteenth and eighteenth centuries were 18 months for men and 39.2 months for women (Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, "Marriage, Widowhood, and Divorce," in The History of the European Family, vol. 1, Family Life in Early Modern Times, 1500–1780, ed. David I. Kertzer and Mario Barbagli [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001], 225). For England, the gendered patterns of remarriage intervals were similar but less pronounced than for northwestern Europe as a whole: widows waited 12.6 months, while widows waited 19.4 months (Schofield and Wrigley, "Remarriage intervals," 214). According to one group of scholars studying early modern England, "Very rapid remarriage was never common: in late Elizabethan and early Stuart England about 5 percent of male remarriages took place within two months of the death of the wife, but by the end of the eighteenth century the figure was down to about 1 percent." The speed of remarriage was also linked to the number of dependent children in a household, the age of a widow or widower, and the rural or urban nature of the community studied (E. A. Wrigley, R. S. Davies, J. E. Oeppen, and R. S. Schofield, English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 176–92). Vivien Brodsky argues that for Londoners, and particularly for widows of craftsmen and tradesmen, remarriage could be swift ("Widows in Late Elizabethan London: Remarriage, Economic Opportunity, and Family Orientations," in World We Have Gained, ed. Bonfield, Smith, and Wrightson, 122–54).


15. Recent work in European family history has suggested that kin networks were not replaced by the nuclear family but rather remained important even after 1750. The focus of the clan shifted from lineage and inheritance to "alliance and affinity." See David Warren Sabean, Simon Touscher, and Jon Mathieu, eds., Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development (1500–1900) (New York: Berghahn, 2007), 3.


17. This transformation has been studied and debated, but most scholars conclude that a new ideology emerged about family life in Enlightenment Europe and in North America in the eighteenth century. For the idea of a real transition to "modern" families based on marital affection and enlightened child rearing in Europe, see Philippe Ariès,


25. For the link between family patterns and class formation, see Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnson, eds., The Middle Class: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class (New York: Routledge, 2000). Most scholars of early modern England would agree that by the eighteenth century, some sort of middling group existed between the gentry and the “lower sort.” Did this group between the poor and the elite, the “middling sort” of the eighteenth century, have a Marxist sense of class consciousness, an awareness that they were unique? If class categories existed, who belonged to the middle class? An economic approach, for example, might insist on defining the boundaries of this group by income or profession. In contrast, those taking a social or cultural history approach might focus on mentalités—cultural markers of status. Finally, did a middle class “rise” in the eighteenth century, or had it existed all along? For a summary of some of these arguments for England, see John Seed, “From Middling Sort to Middle Class in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century England,” in Social Orders and Social Class in Europe since 1500: Studies


CHAPTER ONE


2. James Sullivan to Rufus King, 23 April 1786, in ibid.