

## WIVES AND HUSBANDS

## 6.5 Marital breakdown: Margaret Littleton, 1606

The most detailed information we have about ordinary marriages comes from the histories of marriages that went seriously wrong and ended up in court. From these, historians can deduce not just what went wrong in extraordinary cases, but also what was expected of marriages in ordinary circumstances. Margaret Littleton's petition to the Staffordshire quarter sessions in 1606 was supported by a minister and six of her neighbours. She requested maintenance from her husband, who had allegedly evicted her from the marital home; his own petition complained that she had taken their household goods unlawfully. The justice ordered 'that Mr Littleton take his wife home and use her as befits a husband'.

Staffordshire Quarter Sessions Rolls, Staffordshire RO, Q/SR 98/31, 32 (Trinity Sessions 1606).

Lamentably complaining sheweth unto the honourable and right worshipful of this his majesty's court of justice and equity wherein many a poor distressed person is relieved and misdemeanours reformed I do most humbly crave justice forth of this court because the state of my life and maintenance lieth in the hands of authority which doth consist in justice.

That it may please the honourable and worshipful to consider of my poverty and want being distressed and wanting maintenance of my husband whom by the law of God is to maintain me being his lawful wife and he hath diverse and sundry times cast me off into the world and ever I did with patience endure the wrong by him unto me done so long being not able to use any means wherein I should maintain my self and withall void of friends in regard of my years and poverty and my husband putting me from him of no offence and contrary to law. Wherein for maintenance I am constrained to beg and be relieved abroad so long as I might have my neighbours' charitable devotion both in diet and lodging and now doth my said husband by threatening words cause all my neighbours to refuse me for that he sayeth law is against any man that taketh in his neighbour's wife and yieldeth her any maintenance without his consent by which means all my neighbours have refused me and doth maintain and keep in his house a lewd and bad woman whom causeth my husband to put me from him which person is by the churchwardens presented both to the king's advocate and ordinary of the jurisdiction of Penkrige and they both stand excommunicate and say they will live together in denial of law. Thus humbly craving that justice that shall belong to such offenders that will live so openly to the undoing of me and three motherless children and that I may have some order by our worships set down for my maintenance I shall be daily bounden to pray for you with long and happy days: whom I pray God bless and keep for ever.

## 6.6 Male violence: Anne Younge, 1608

Anne Younge, alias Lyngham (probably her maiden name), went to the London consistory court to sue for separation from her husband, a tailor in Ludgate Hill, in 1608, on the grounds of his violence. Canon law in this area demanded proof of lethal danger; 'moderate correction' was legal. The first witness, Margaret Bonefant, had lodged the couple in her house in 1607, and continued to be a close friend of Anne's. To some extent, what went on in such marriages was a public affair. However, it was also open to a variety of interpretations. While wives pleaded for separation on the grounds of both physical and mental cruelty, supported by the detailed stories of their witnesses, husbands defended their actions on the grounds of justifiable anger, reasonable correction, or occasionally, desperation. The results of these cases varied. The most a wife could hope for was to be granted the right to live apart from her husband, with a sum of alimony decided by the court; it was the settlement of alimony that provoked disagreements such as that here over the husband's pecuniary worth. Many judges, following the Protestant stress on keeping married couples together, aimed to reconcile rather than separate couples and frequently ordered them to go home and live quietly.

Consistory Court of London Deposition Book, LMA, DL/C 218, pp. 50-2, 88 (June 1608).

[Margaret Bonefant, wife of James Bonefant, woolman, of London, for the last twelve years, aged about 32; she has known Anne Younge for 9 or 10 years and James Younge for 3 months.]

[To the 2nd and 3rd articles she deposes and says] that in the month of February last past upon a Sunday in the afternoon . . . this deponent went to the articulate Anne Younge alias Lyngham to her own house in St Bride's parish in London to visit her and to see how she did and coming to her she found the said Anne Younge alias Lyngham so beaten and bruised and swollen about her head face and body that she was not able to speak nor go nor stir any of her limbs to help her self and her jaws were displaced or otherwise so hurt with beating that she was not able to stir them and the gristle of her nose was so bruised that until by the help of a surgeon it was raised and the flesh suppled she could not well fetch or take any breath at the nose, but seemed as though she were more like to die of that beating than to recover and live. And soon after that this jurate came and saw the said Anne in this miserable case, the said James Younge her husband came in, to whom this jurate said she was sorry to see his wife in this miserable case. Whereunto he answered that he did think her estate had been better when he married her than he did then find it, as he said, and then she this deponent asking him if he had so used her, he said that which was done to her he had done, and so she this deponent then said unto him that was not the way to know or understand of her estate but if he would know that it must be his kind usage of her and not that severity for that was a way to make an end of them both. Aye, quoth he the same Younge, I am told I shall be hanged if she die within a year and a day<sup>1</sup> but if I be there

1. Death within a year and a day after an assault would be accounted manslaughter.

is but one out of the way. And this speech of his acknowledging his so beating of his said wife he the same Younge did avouch once or twice after within a week after walking with this deponent in the street homeward towards her this deponent's house in St Olaves parish from his the same Younge's house. And she saith there was present and saw her the same Anne Younge alias Lyngham in that pitiful sort as aforesaid Mrs Anne Cotes one Mr Grace and divers others. . . .

[To the 5th article she says and deposes] that both at the time afore by her deposed of upon the Sunday and twice after the same week when she this deponent came to see her the same Anne Younge alias Lyngham she hath been in sad want as that she this deponent did see Mrs Cotes and others that came to her give her money and send for drink wood and coals and for meat and likewise for ointments for her and for divers things that was fit for her comfort she having no money herself but being in great want and need. . . .

[To the 11th article she says and deposes] that for the reasons by her deposed of she saith that she verily believeth and that not without cause the said Anne dareth not nor may not live safely with her said husband in one house for fear of death or at least such cruel usage as she is not able to endure. . . .

[To the 13th article . . . ] she saith she never heard any body ever say better of him than that he was and is such a severe cruel man to his wife.

[To the 14th she says and deposes] that at such time as the articulate James Younge and his said wife lay in her this deponent's house . . . he hath acknowledged and confessed both to her this deponent and in her hearing that he was worth four hundred pounds. . . .

[Personal Answers of James Younge . . . ]

[To the 2nd and 3rd articles he answers] that Anne Younge this respondent's wife articulate having given him this respondent many vile and bad speeches, he this respondent hath sundry times in the time articulate chidden her and given her many angry words again. And he sayeth that the week before Shrovetide last she . . . having taken up a thing of wood like unto a bowl to strike him this respondent, he this respondent sayeth that he did strike her the same Anne with his fist in so much as her face was black and blue. Whereupon she the same Anne forsook his this respondent's bed, and that night and the next following lay by herself and the next morning he this respondent going up into her chamber and seeing her purse lying there took out two rings or three that was in it, and when she arose and found that he this respondent had taken away her rings, she became so sullen that she counterfeited herself sick and went to bed and kept her bed a week after whereby she caused him this respondent to spend 40s. in keeping of her in that her counterfeit sickness.

[To the 4th . . . he answers] that the same day that he this respondent

did so strike his said wife, presently after one Mrs Cotes one of his said wife's acquaintance being there told him this respondent that if his wife did otherwise than well he this respondent should be hanged, whereupon he this respondent said unto her that if she would not be quiet it were well she were gone out at doors, but she went away none the sooner.

[To the 8th and 9th . . . he answers] that such hath been and was the wickedness of the articulate Anne his this respondent's said wife towards him this respondent as that . . . diverse times when he this respondent hath gone out of doors she hath fallen down of her knees and prayed to God that he this respondent might never come in at the doors again whereby this respondent was in a desperate mind about the time articulate for which he is now heartily sorry and desireth almighty God to forgive him as that in the morning when he arose out of his bed (he lying alone as he had done long before and after his said wife refusing his company) he did stab himself with a knife which he carrieth to bed with him in the breast in two places.

[To the 14th . . . he answers] that he this respondent is a tailor and getteth thereby 2s. 6d. a week and not above 3s. and is not worth forty shillings his debts paid, but he saith that [if] his said wife would be quiet and live quietly with him in the face of God as he this respondent desireth to do, he doubteth not but he should get much more and be better able to keep and maintain both himself and her than now he is to keep himself, his mind is so unquiet by reason of this trouble.

### 6.7 Pressing after the knowledge of the Lord: Mary Penington, c. 1640

In a time when religious commitment was central to many women's sense of their identities, religious belief could be the basis for marriage, religious dissent the foundation for an independent marital choice. Mary Proude (1624–82), born into a Puritan gentry family in Kent, was orphaned before she was 3 years old. She was educated by her guardian, Sir Edward Partridge, and his widowed sister Mrs Springett, who practised medicine and oculistry. Here, Mary writes of Mrs Springett's son William, who became a colonel in the Parliamentary army, and whom she married when she was about 18, he 20. Their first child died but their second, Gulielma, was born shortly after William's death at 23. Mary went on to become a prominent member of the Society of Friends and the wife of Isaac Penington; Gulielma married Sir William Penn. Two editions of the text she left survive, both clearly edited from the original; see also her dream in Chapter 10.

Mary Penington, *A Brief Account of my Exercises from my Childhood: Left with my Dear Daughter, Gulielma Maria Penn*, Philadelphia, 1848, pp. 4–5.

I minded not those marriages that was propounded to me by vain persons, but having desired of the Lord that I might have one that feared, I had a belief that though then I knew none of my outward rank that was such a one, yet that the Lord would provide one for me; and in this belief I