

# Parental Grief and Prayer in the Middle Ages: Religious Coping in Swedish Miracle Stories

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*This article focuses on expressions of bereavement and religious coping in medieval miracle stories from Sweden. The stories come from the collections of St. Birgitta (Bridget) of Sweden, the Blessed Bishop Nicolaus Hermannii (Sw. Nils Hermansson) of Linköping and the Blessed Katarina of Vadstena, and were recorded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.*

*Catherine M. Sanders's modern five stages of bereavement have been used as the theory of analysis through Kay Talbot's adaptation of the theory for parents in grief. This theoretical foundation has provided new insights into how parental grief was expressed in medieval Sweden – and in stark contrast to Continental research on the same topic. Parents of both sexes expressed their grief outwardly through tears and crying, and a reluctance to accept that their children were dead. Throughout the miracle stories, lay people constructed their own prayers for miraculous intervention without the aid of any priests. This makes fathers and mothers in medieval Sweden agents of their own in terms of praying to God and being able to construct their own forms of religious coping.*

## Introduction

The death of a child is one of the most feared things that could happen to a parent. Nonetheless, it happens, and causes grief not only among parents but also those close to the bereaved family.<sup>1</sup> While this is just as true today as it was in medieval society, some nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars such as Philippe Ariès believed that public emotions of mourning were not accepted or visible in the medieval period before the sixteenth century.<sup>2</sup> He emphasised this even further when considering parental expressions of mourning by claiming that parental emotions towards children were something that developed as a result of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Avery & Reynolds 1999; Kaartinen 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Ariès 1983.

progression of the modern era.<sup>3</sup> These conclusions have been refuted by scholars who have examined the dense levels of primary sources constituted by medieval miracle stories.<sup>4</sup> It seems that scholars such as Ariès were not keen on accepting that parents grieved for the loss of their children regardless of modernisation and enlightenment.

The ways in which parents try to understand and survive the trauma of a dead child have often been described as coping strategies. Since all of the miracle stories examined here contain religious elements, and atheist attitudes were non-existent in the Middle Ages, the aspect of religion in coping strategies is of primary significance for this paper as the religious framework provides the bereaved with a context of meaning and support. No previous study has been published on coping strategies in a medieval context, but there are studies on the role religion plays in coping strategies for bereaved parents in modern society.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to examine this religious coping among parents in the Middle Ages through the use of Swedish miracle stories. By “religious coping”, I mean coping strategies for confronting extreme situations in life, such as death and illness, which are constructed and established within a religious framework.<sup>6</sup> It is not possible to use modern theories of grieving parents for their dead or dying children – a field of research of its own – without combining them with theories of miraculous intervention. The miracle of bringing a child back to life is a life-changing event and alters the way in which a parent understands his or her own existence. As a reader of medieval miracles, one comes into constant contact with parents whose lives have been transformed through divine intervention.

Mortality among children was, unfortunately, frequent in the Middle Ages, and the modern expectation of being outlived by one’s children was not considered the general rule. In fact, a great number of children died, and the catastrophe was therefore something considered as an ordinary reality rather than an extraordinary event. Each miracle story which concerns a dying or dead child deals with this ordinary situation – but with the difference that something extraordinary followed, the divine miracle, that led to the defeat of death. Still, for the absolute majority of children dying in the medieval period, there is nothing written about what happened and how the parents acted. Miracle stories provide considerable information about individual women and men, with every stratum of medieval society represented, although with an over-representation of the lower peasant stratum in the Nordic miracle stories. One should, however, not consider these miracle stories to be realistic and precise accounts of the normal procedures of the death of a child, since they were reported only after a successful miracle. Nonetheless, in some of the miracle stories information is provided about how parents reacted when they

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3 Ariès 1975.

4 Cf. Finucane 2000; Krötzel 1989.

5 Klass 1991; Breslin & Lewis 2008.

6 Cf. Bänziger et al. 2008.

discovered or realised that their child was dead or dying, their emotional responses, as well as how the corpse was initially prepared for the funeral before the miracle altered the situation.

## Miracle Stories as a Genre

Miracle stories consist of reported divine miracles. How then can a miracle be defined? If prayer can be understood as communication with the divine and entities close to the divine, miracles can similarly be defined as divine communication with human beings through extraordinary actions. God is understood in Christianity to be able to act in the human world *a priori* but miracles traditionally need to be asked for by someone before God performs them (and no one knows if a miracle will be performed at all). Miracle stories differ from other stories of disastrous events and thus cannot as such be properly analysed without this particular difference in mind – divine intervention. All miracles end with a positive outcome with the divine will revealing itself and healing the sick, which is traditionally the primary meaning of a miracle in Christianity.<sup>7</sup> When a miracle story is recorded, those reporting it already knew the positive outcome and are interpreting the whole incident in this light. According to Niels Christian Hvidt, miracles need to have a combination of three aspects, none of which can be omitted. The first aspect is the nature of the miracle where God acts beyond or in ways different from the natural order. The second aspect is the psychology of the miracle, whereby the response of those present at the miraculous occurrence causes them to consider it an act of God. The third and final aspect is the symbolic meaning of the miracle by which God is seen and interpreted as wishing to communicate with the human race.<sup>8</sup>

The sources used in this chapter come from three of the largest miracle collections of medieval Sweden with a total of 450 miracles, which were recorded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: Saint Birgitta of Sweden (ca. 1303–1373),<sup>9</sup> her daughter the Blessed Katarina of Vadstena (1331/1332–1381)<sup>10</sup> and the bishop of Linköping at that time, the Blessed Bishop Nicolaus Hermanni of Linköping (ca. 1326–1391).<sup>11</sup> The material is relatively homogenous since it comes from three presumed saints connected to the Brigittine Abbey of Vadstena. None of these miracle collections alone can provide sufficient breadth and depth of knowledge of how lay people formed religious practices, but combining the general and the specific brings unique insights into everyday religiosity and the practices of miracle praying.

7 Cf. Hvidt 2003, 14–17; Pawlikowski 2007.

8 Hvidt 2003, 14–17.

9 Collijn (ed.) 1924–1931.

10 Collijn (ed.) 1942–1946; Lundén (ed.) 1981.

11 Schück (ed.) 1873–1895. For numbered lists of all Swedish medieval miracles, see Myrdal & Bäärnhielm (1994, 133–156). The symbol # within square brackets, e.g., [Miracle #40], is used in my article to refer to the numbers in these lists.

In order to use miracle stories as a source for religious practices, certain source-critical problems must be dealt with. Miracle stories were usually recorded with the one primary purpose of advocating the canonisation of a deceased holy person. This avowed purpose, while obvious, does not make the source useless for other studies once it is identified. Source-critical analysis of miracle stories reveals vital information for use in identification and analysis of religious practices. Source-critical criteria for miracle stories have been developed by scholars such as Janken Myrdal and Göran Bäärnhielm, who have identified a number of critical points, namely: 1) the time between miracle and report; 2) witness testimonies correcting the stories and adding more information; 3) the knowledge that over-dramatised stories could create a bad reputation for a cult; 4) the lack of unlikely stories even after the death of the holy person; 5) the lack of coherence with biblical stories; 6) the lack of coherence with other saint legends; and finally 7) considerable information on details regarding the context, such as horses, stables and the environment.<sup>12</sup> Myrdal and Bäärnhielm conclude that the Swedish miracles are reliable as sources of information for studies concerning what is related in them.<sup>13</sup>

There is little specific research on medieval religious practices. Considerable research has been done on medieval miracles, but this has had little or no interest in religiosity, often focusing rather on other aspects of miracles, such as medicine and canon law. The aim of this study is to contribute a religious perspective on miracle stories. Emphasising the core of these stories – the religious aspect – is, however, an approach much less frequently used in research. Among those who have done so are Ronald C. Finucane, in his *Miracles and Pilgrims* (1977), which analyses the spread of miracle cults in medieval England, and his *The Rescue of Innocents* (2000), in which children and deaths of children are examined; and André Vauchez in his *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du moyen âge* (1981), which has become something of a manual for quantitative analysis of miracle stories and their narrative structures. Other researchers working with similar approaches are Christian Krötzel in “Parent-Child Relations in Medieval Scandinavia According to Scandinavian Miracle Collections” (1989), which focuses on parental behaviour in miracle stories; Sari Katajala-Peltomaa’s *Gender, Miracles and Daily Life* (2009), in which she describes everyday phenomena in European miracle collections; Anders Fröjmark’s *Mirakler och helgonkult* (1992), which examines late medieval Scandinavian miracle cults, and “Childbirth Miracles in Swedish Miracle Collections” (2012) in which the phenomenon of stillborn children is examined; Janken Myrdal and Göran Bäärnhielm’s *Kvinnor, barn och fester i medeltida mirakelberättelser* (1994), which not only analyses medieval miracle stories as historical sources, but also lists all extant medieval Swedish miracle stories; and my own study, *The Prayer Life of Peasant Communities in Late Medieval Sweden* (Aldrin 2011), which

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<sup>12</sup> Myrdal & Bäärnhielm 1994, 119–124.

<sup>13</sup> Myrdal & Bäärnhielm 1994, 119–124; cf. Aldrin 2011, 136–142.

concentrates on practices of lay prayer, should also be mentioned in this group of studies.

Two aspects will be highlighted: firstly the initial reactions and responses of grief, and secondly the ways in which prayer was used as a religious coping strategy. Since miracle stories only tell of successful miracles, the first aspect will investigate the coming of death into the family regardless of a miraculous outcome, and the second aspect will focus on the exit of death through the prayers of the parents.

## Enter Death: The Grieving Parent

Since the Middle Ages, many theories of bereavement have evolved which aid the understanding of sorrow and coping among parents. The perhaps most commonly cited bereavement theory is that of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) – the five stages of grief – where dying patients were coping and realising that they were going to die. This theory has been much criticised, especially as it has been popularly used as a general pattern for grieving regardless of situation. Instead, it seems that parental grief over a child's death is different to the realisation of one's own immediate death and grief for adults.<sup>14</sup>

In this section, I will examine the initial reactions of bereaved parents in the medieval material. What is perhaps the most fruitful modern theory of bereavement has been outlined by Catherine M. Sanders (1998) and further developed by Kay Talbot (2002). It can be described as the five phases of bereavement, and focuses explicitly on parental grief over the death of a child. The five phases are: phase one, shock; phase two, awareness of loss; phase three, conservation; phase four, healing; and the fifth and final phase, renewal.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the medieval miracle stories, it is plausible to assume that they all belong to phase one – shock – which “usually passes into the next phase when rituals of death are over and constricted emotions begin to release and overflow”, since the time of bereavement is short in the miracle stories and, before the child is buried, the miracle has been received and death is driven off.<sup>16</sup>

According to Sanders and Talbot, the first phase usually lasts until after the burial, when parents can release their pent up feelings of loss and thereby move on to the second phase of bereavement, the awareness of loss.<sup>17</sup> Sanders presents both characteristics and symptoms of this first phase, several of which are seen in the miracle stories.

Notwithstanding the great time difference between the contemporary theory and the miracle stories, Sanders' theory can still shed some light on the understanding

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<sup>14</sup> Calderwood 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Talbot 2002, 66.

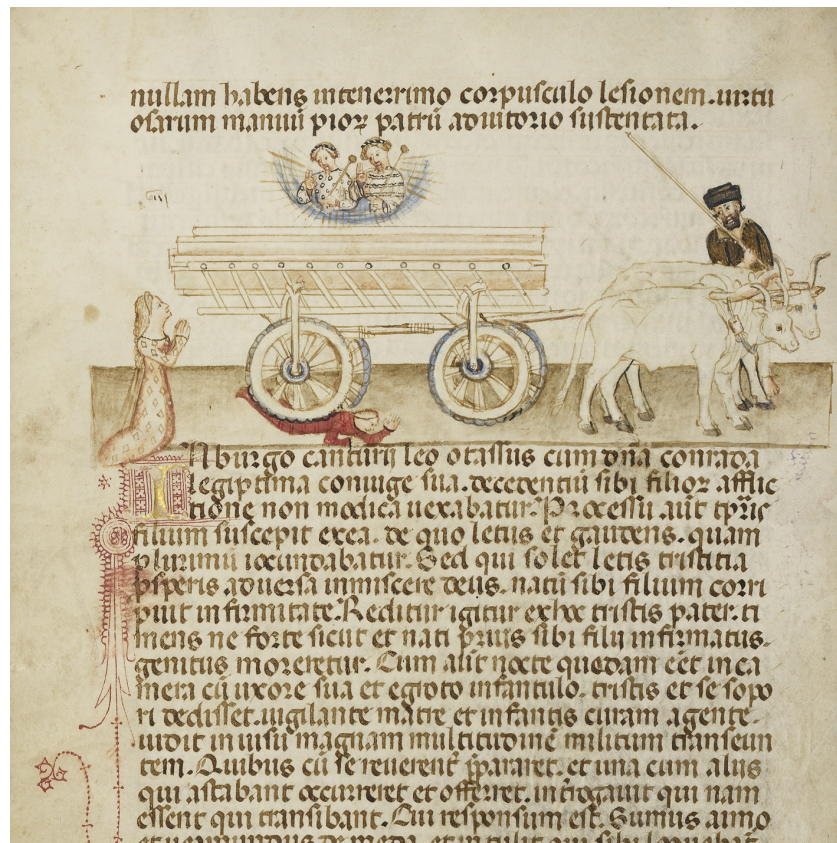
<sup>16</sup> Talbot 2002, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Sanders 1998; summarised in Talbot 2002, 66.



and interpretation of parental grief in these medieval narratives. It is possible to see a correlation between psychological behaviour both prior to and during bereavement, presuming that the ways in which one acted previously have set the patterns for the ways in which grief is expressed.<sup>18</sup> Since Sanders' bereavement theory does not focus on cultural behaviour as much as on physical and psychological behaviour, it will be used here as a means to analyse bereavement behaviour in medieval miracle stories.

The examples examined in this section provide information about actions and reactions beyond simple information on the discovery of a dead child and the parents praying for a miracle which subsequently happened. Out of the 37 miracle stories on dying or dead children examined, 12 stories (5 Birgitta, 0 Nicolaus Hermanni, 7 Katarina) provide information regarding the discovery, 17 (5 Birgitta, 3 Nicolaus Hermanni, 9 Katarina) describe parental emotions when they realise that their child is dying or dead, and 14 (1 Birgitta, 4 Nicolaus Hermanni, 9 Katarina) relate the preparation of the corpse. First, the discovery itself will be examined.<sup>19</sup>



Picture 1. This image shows a posthumous miracle by two Italian saints, Aimo and his brother Vermando. The girl Allegranza was accidentally crushed under carriage wheels, but her mother prayed for the intervention of the saints, and she was saved.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Riley et al. 2007; Schwab 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Childbirth miracles are included in the material, but are not examined further since they have already been examined recently in Fröjmark 2012.

## Discoveries of Death

All miracle stories begin with a description of the reason why a miracle was prayed for. In the case of dead or dying children, this description includes not only the sequence of events that ultimately led to the death, but sometimes also information on when the parents become aware of this. The stories can be organised into two strands, where the first concerns is a child who becomes ill and gradually becomes worse until the child has died, while the second is some extreme and sudden situation in which the child dies without previous illness. In the case of gradual death, the parents are described as being close to the dying child, and their reactions to when this transfer from life to death occurs will be examined here. In contrast, the parents were not always present when death occurred suddenly. Instead they discovered the child when it was already dead, or when they were told of it by someone else who was present at the child's death.

An example of a powerful reaction when a child was discovered can be found in a miracle of the Blessed Katarina of Vadstena from 1472, in which a child of eighteen months disappeared and the grandfather and mother were searching for it. The child was later discovered drowned in a well, stuck upside down:<sup>20</sup>

With the aid of the mother, he dragged the boy out, laid him on his mother's knee and rolled him to and fro in order to see if he could find life in him, but it could not be found, since the child was all cold and stiff.<sup>21</sup>

In this story, the mother and the grandfather tried to discern whether or not the child was dead by rolling him over the mother's legs, but the child gave no sign of life. Rolling the child also occurs in other similar miracle stories of dead children as a way of trying to bring the child back to life.

Of the five senses – hearing, sight, touch, smell and taste – three senses are represented in the miracle stories – hearing, sight and touch – as these would have been the only actual senses used in the discovery of a newly deceased person. The most common way to determine the death of a child in the stories is by sight, in 9 out of 11 miracles which tell of the discovery (out of the total 37 miracles examined). This is exemplified in a miracle story of the Blessed Katarina of Vadstena from 1471, where a father and his child (no age is given) were coming back from doing business when the horses bolted.<sup>22</sup> The boy was cast out of the wagon and a sack of malt fell onto him, crushing him to death. The father is described as being “half dead in pain at seeing his son”,<sup>23</sup> and the boy lay dead for three hours. The

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20 Lundén (ed.) 1981, fascimile 74 (Miracle #40).

21 In Latin: “[...] *quem mediante matris adiutorio ipse extraxit et in sinu matris ponens voluit et reuoluit / ut videret si vitam in eo inuenire posset / sed non est inuenta / quia omnino frigidus et rigidus erat.*”

22 Collijn (ed.) 1942–1946, 96–97 (Miracle #11).

23 Ibid., 96. In Latin: “*Pater vero prefati pueri hec videns quasi semimortuus pre dolore [...].*”

parents are described as first seeing that the child was dead or dying, and then their reactions came. Still, the example cited above of the child being rolled to and fro is not of this kind, illustrating instead proof of death made through touch and the temperature of the child.

The two kinds of death discoveries differ in the sense of the emotional preparation for the realisation that the child is dead. When death approaches gradually, the parents will have some time to consider what is about to happen, although this is not seen as an emotional protection by the parent. When death is sudden, the parents are unprepared for it and their reactions differ from those of parents whose realisation is gradual. When the parents have realised that their child is dead, the life-long existence of being a bereaved parent begins.

### Emotional Responses

In many of the miracle stories, the discoveries are directly followed by the emotional responses of the parents. Although the emotions of being bereaved as a parent are the same regardless of time and culture, the ways in which they are expressed are culturally encoded. In Western European medieval miracle studies, it is common to have a gender-coded grief pattern, where men and women express their emotions differently.<sup>24</sup> This pattern has been interpreted as resulting from the differing roles men and women had in medieval society, where men had more outward, society-focused activity than women, who had more inward, family-focused activity. This generalisation has, however, been questioned. In the Icelandic sagas, for example, bereaved fathers often show strong emotions that may indicate strong links between father and child.<sup>25</sup> In Scandinavian miracles, it has also previously been concluded that the gender-specific roles found on the continent do not apply to the Nordic region.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lansing 2008; Finucane 2000, 151–158; Houlbrooke 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Katajala-Peltomaa 2013; Jørgensen Itnyre 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Krötzl 1989.





Picture 2. In the Biblical story (Gen. 21:1–20), Hagar, Abraham's concubine, and their son Ishmael were banished into the wilderness at the insistence of Abraham's wife. As they ran out of water, Hagar left Ishmael under a bush as she could not watch him die. She started to cry in desperation, but God sent her relief in the form of an angel and helping her find a well.

Over half of the miracle stories examined, 17 of the 37 (5 Birgitta, 3 Nicolaus Hermanni, 9 Katarina), describe the emotions of the bereaved parents. In the miracle stories not describing any particular emotional response, the only reaction by the parents to the death of their child is to pray to a particular saint. Still, this response is omitted in this paper since it provides little new for the investigation – all such stories involve someone praying for a miracle and the miracle itself.

Perhaps the most peculiar emotional response from a modern point of view is the commonly occurring custom of leaving a dead child for a couple of hours in order for it to come back to life – or to determine that it really is dead. In almost all the miracle stories mentioning this, the child is described as physically dead; that is, not moving, stiff, cold, with a bluish skin tone, etc. In one miracle story of the Blessed Katarina of Vadstena from 1471, however, the same description is given of a girl of seven, who was lying still, but foaming at the mouth for the whole period

of time and whose skin colour seemed blue.<sup>27</sup> She lay like this for an hour, during which everyone seeing her considered her dead. Still, in all these examples with the child lying as if dead for a couple of hours without the parents touching it, the child returned to life only after a miracle.

In the miracles examined, both mothers and fathers wept for their dead children, contrary to what has been argued for Continental and British miracle stories.<sup>28</sup> Fathers were allowed to express their grief in tears and by showing great pain in the same way as mothers, without being criticised for this by the redactors of the miracle collections. It seems that public grief was natural and common to both sexes in medieval Sweden and that a strong emotional response by the parents emphasises the greatness of the divine intervention in the form of the miracle.

In a story of the Blessed Katarina of Vadstena from 1441, a visiting Carmelite monk visited the house of a family whose loss of their three-year-old daughter shows a particularly good example of this gender-neutral weeping.<sup>29</sup> The monk found both parents and their friends in grief, weeping and lamenting, and when he asked them the reason for their sorrow he was told that they wept for their daughter who had been running just a moment ago before she was killed in an accident:<sup>30</sup>

While she was indeed, together with her husband and other friends, grieving and weeping for the death of their beloved, Porse entered [...] asking the cause of such great sorrow. The aforementioned wife said: "We mourn for this daughter of ours, who an hour ago killed herself by playing with and using a knife".<sup>31</sup>

Another example of similar responses can be found in the miracle of the same Blessed Katarina of Vadstena that occurred in 1441, when a son of eighteen months had died.<sup>32</sup> The boy had swallowed a large ear of wheat and was tormented by it for five weeks before ceasing to show signs of life. The story relates that the father and the mother saw this and "grieved more than anyone can imagine" (ibid, 85).<sup>33</sup>

In one of the miracle stories, the emotions of a parent are vividly presented, describing not only the grief and tears but also how the mother wanted to come physically into contact with the deceased. The example comes from a miracle by the Blessed Katarina of Vadstena from 1472, where a three-year-old girl fell out of a window and died from the fall, and was found by the city guard and brought to

27 Collijn (ed.) 1942–1946, 99–100 (Miracle #30). This presentation comes from two reports of the same miracle (one recording the miracle and one later complementary recording).

28 Gertsman 2001.

29 Collijn (ed.) 1942–1946, 122–123 (Miracle #8).

30 Ibid., 122–123.

31 "*Ipsa vera cum marito suo et alijs amicis mortem eius amare dolente et lugente, superuenit quidam Porse [...] querens causam tante tristicie. Cui prefata mulier dixit: 'Lugemus hic filiam nostram, que hic ante vnam horam iocando et ludendo vno cultello seipsam interfecit.'*"

32 Lundén (ed.) 1981, facsimiles 84–85 (Miracle #55).

33 In Latin: "*Pater et mater hec videntes et plusquam credi potest con gementes.*"

the mother.<sup>34</sup> When the mother realised that her daughter was dead, she did not leave the body for burial preparations for several hours and instead tried to bring her daughter back to life again.<sup>35</sup>

The mother was indescribably upset when she saw her daughter dead and pitifully covered with blood. For almost three hours, she embraced, caressed and stroked her, and rolled her back and forth; still, the spirit, which had burst away, by no means returned to the body it was separated from. She therefore directed that the corpse be carried to a private room, according to the custom.<sup>36</sup>

This is often not the case in the other miracle stories, it being more common for dead children to be laid out to rest in either the common room or a separate room after it has died as described in the miracle. It seems that the emotions of the parents, if they are described, are mostly aimed at the living and the divine. One should, however, not draw the conclusion that no such emotions occurred at all – as this example effectively demonstrates.

The most obvious emotional reaction in all miracle stories is that of hoping for a miracle – which eventually did occur – which illustrates the religious coping involved in the medieval context. The ability of God to create miracles exists in these stories and was considered to be something natural and accepted within the context of religion in the medieval period. Still, these miracle stories give an unrepresentative image of bereavement since the vast majority of dead children did not come to life again through a miracle, only miraculous events being preserved for analysis. In the stories, not all those present consider the option of divine miraculous intervention. Often it is only one or two people who begin to pray to a particular saint for a miracle or, as in one of the stories, an external visitor mentions the possibility and hope for a miracle arises. The emotional responses in the miracle stories are often direct and impulsive, such as efforts to bring the child back to life through physical activities including rolling it to and fro – although it does not seem possible to regain life at all. Parents also cried a great deal in the stories, while some parents seem paralysed in their grief so that others needed to continue the procedures of preparing the deceased or praying to a saint.

### Preparation of the Dead for Burial

The actions immediately after the moment of death were also part of the preparations for the burial of the dead, when it is realised that the person is really dead and

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34 Lundén (ed.) 1981, facsimiles 76–77 (Miracle #43).

35 Ibid., facsimiles 76–77.

36 “*Mater vero turbata inestimabiliter filiam videns mortuam et sanguine miserabiliter circumfusam amplecitur tractat palpat voluit et reuoluit spacio fere trium horarum Verumptamen spiritus a corpore separatus minime reuertitur Ideo percepit cadauer in domum priuatam deportari ut moris est.*”

that the corpse needs to be made ready for burial.<sup>37</sup> Religious coping plays an important part here since the rite of passage of burial is an important step between the living and the dead. The deceased joins the dead and is part of memory, and in the medieval Christian context also becomes a part of the afterlife (where it was perfectly normal to communicate with the deceased through prayer).

In nearly half of the miracle stories, 14 of the 37 (1 Birgitta, 4 Nicolaus Hermanni, 9 Katarina), preparations for the burial had already begun when one or both of the parents began to pray for a miracle. All of these mention the immediate preparation or how the corpse was laid out in the house before the actual burial. None of the miracles tell of divine intervention during or after the burial. It is as if the miracle could only occur during the first days after death – indeed, corpses were buried quite quickly in the medieval period.

The most common preparation of the deceased in the miracle stories (12 of 14) was to lay the child out either on the floor or on a bench in a separate room. In cases where there seems to be a possibility for the child to return to life as previously mentioned, there is apparently a pattern of keeping the child aside. In contrast, in only five of these miracle stories is the reader told of more specific and final preparation of the deceased (where death is certain). In the miracle story cited above about the Blessed Katarina of Vadstena and the girl who fell out of the window, the reader is told that the mother carried the corpse of her daughter to a separate room, according to custom, that this house was high and had several rooms since one could be spared for the deceased.<sup>38</sup> Similar to this positioning of the corpse is the miracle of the Blessed Katarina of Vadstena, occurring sometime between 1416–1455 or 1470–1477, which concerns another girl dying of illness when her father was away on a long journey.<sup>39</sup> When the father returned, he went into the room where the deceased child was placed on a bier. He told the others in the household that they were not allowed to touch the corpse and he then began to pray for a miracle. In this story, the corpse was being prepared for burial, hence the touching of the corpse, but the reader is not told how this was done except for placing the dead girl on a bier in a separate room. The practice of laying corpses on biers also occurs in a previously cited miracle story of the same Blessed Katarina of Vadstena where a monk visited a household and found the family grieving and lamenting.<sup>40</sup> The monk went to the bier where the dead girl lay and mentioned the possibility of a miracle.

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37 For studies on burials in medieval Sweden, see Mejsholm 2009; Nilsson 2009; Nilsson 1989.

38 Lundén (ed.) 1981, facsimiles 76–77 (Miracle #43).

39 Lundén (ed.) 1981, facsimiles 55–56 (Miracle #9).

40 Collijn (ed.) 1942–1946, 122–123 (Miracle #8).





Picture 3. Hannibal Gustav Wrangel af Salmis (1641–1643), the firstborn of Count Carl Gustaf Wrangel af Salmis and Anna Margareta von Haugwitz, died at the age of 16 months in Germany. His distraught parents had a posthumous portrait painted of their son on his *lit de parade*.

Only two miracle stories specifically reveal more about the preparation of the deceased other than the positioning of the corpse. In a story of the Blessed Bishop Nicolaus Hermanni of Linköping from 1405, a three-year-old boy died of the plague.<sup>41</sup> While he lay dying, the relatives read and said prayers for his soul, and after the death his father made the sign of the cross over the boy and said five Paternosters and Hail Marys “as for the dead” (*pro defuncto*).<sup>42</sup> Whilst saying this, the father began to consider the possibility of a miracle, according to the recorder of the story. Here the reader is told of prayer practices for a dying child and for the newly deceased. The story also tells of the two standard prayers of medieval religiosity – the Paternoster and the Hail Mary recited five times over. (The third standard text, the Creed, was not used here.) The father thought of something greater while saying these prayers and was rewarded for his faith:<sup>43</sup>

His father Olov marked the boy with the sign of the cross and read five Paternosters and Hail Marys as for the dead. But while he was praying, it came to his mind that he would make a promise on his behalf to master Nicolas's tomb if he could be given his life back. And after a short while, the father and the mother discovered a small red blush on his cheeks and eyelids, and finally his limbs began to move, he began to

41 Schück (ed.) 1873–1895, 347–348 (Miracle #5).

42 Ibid, 347.

43 Ibid, 347–348.



breathe, opened his eyes, came back to life and is living healthy and sound today, the day of the apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul in the year 1411.<sup>44</sup>

It was customary in the medieval period to say these standard prayers and consider various mental themes, such as the grief of the Blessed Virgin Mary or of the healing abilities of particular saints.<sup>45</sup> The second miracle comes from the Blessed Katarina of Vadstena in 1472, where a ten-year-old boy died when a haystack and a ladder fell onto him.<sup>46</sup> The boy's brother and mother saw this, and the brother wanted to take the dead brother away for burial preparations immediately. Those preparations were described as shrouding the body and then burying him.

### The Process of Grief

The first phase in Sanders' bereavement scheme can be traced in the miracle stories although it is necessary to keep in mind that the medieval context is different from today in terms of gestures and emotional expressions. Sanders' system allows, however, expressions of bereavement to be categorised and analysed as part of a grieving process, which enhances the authenticity of these stories.<sup>47</sup>

Of the general characteristics of the first phase, disbelief and confusion particularly can be found expressed in the miracle stories.<sup>48</sup> Disbelief emerges in the perception that the death is not real and that the child is still somehow alive – striking examples of this are the stories of the mother who refuses to leave her dead daughter, as well as the mother and father who try to bring their child back to life by rolling him to and fro, even though he has already been declared dead. Confusion occurs where the bereaved parent realises that the world will be very different without the deceased – this is especially the case with the widow who lost both her children. Other characteristics such as restlessness, feelings of unreality, regression and helplessness, and finally a state of alarm cannot be found explicitly in these miracle stories. One should, however, bear in mind that the accounts of these events were recorded after the miraculous intervention and in the light of God's ability to break through this world's harsh realities.

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44 *"Pater vero predictus Olauus incepit puerum signo crucis signare et legit quinque pater noster et ave maria pro defuncto, sub qua lectura uenit ei in mentem, ut uotum ad sepulchrum domini Nicholai pro eo faceret, si vitam suam recuperare posset. Et modico interuallo facto deprehenderunt idem pater et mater paruum unum ruborem in maxillis defuncti apparere et in palpebris suis, et tandem cepit primo moueri in membris et demum spiritum ducere et demum oculos aperire et vitam consequi et uiuit hodie sanus et incolumis, id est die apostolorum Petri et Pauli de anno domini M CD XI."*

45 Aldrin 2011, 59–64.

46 Lundén (ed.) 1981, facsimiles 77–78 (Miracle #44).

47 Sanders 1998; Talbot 2002, 66.

48 Talbot 2002, 60.

Of the physical symptoms described by Sanders, only one – weeping – can be found in the miracle stories. There is no indication of dryness of the mouth, the need for sighing, loss of muscular control, uncontrolled trembling, startled responses, sleep disturbance or loss of appetite. It may be that the only reason for this is that the miracles occur before these physical symptoms begin to occur, and moreover that the parents did not find it necessary to include information about these things. The psychological symptoms are perhaps the most difficult to discern in these miracle stories. It can be argued that both egocentric phenomena and preoccupation of thoughts with the deceased occur, but these are also part of describing the act of becoming bereaved. Sanders' model of interpretation<sup>49</sup> is a weak instrument of analysis for medieval miracle stories, but it still seems to be the most useful of the bereavement theories in respect to these stories and the analysis of parents in grief.

This theory suggests the conclusion that the parents are affected by the dreadful events not only physically but also psychologically – trying to survive and respond to harsh events. Talbot argues that losing a child is different to other bereavement experiences as it alters so much for the parent in terms of identity, emotions and thoughts of the future.<sup>50</sup> A dead child never leaves the bereaved parent in terms of psychology, but continues to be an important part of his or her life.<sup>51</sup>

### **The Miracle Story as Narrative Coping**

An effective means of psychological survival for the parents is to create narratives of what happened and about the deceased child, thereby creating a memory for coping.<sup>52</sup> Miracle stories can, in my view, be seen as pertaining to extreme situations – narratives of escaping bereavement by a hair's breadth. The event that caused the miracle to happen was remembered by the parents for their entire lives – even as it would have been today, or any other time. Miracle stories are, in this sense, not only evidence of a particular saint's power and God's ability to heal, but are also reconstructions of tragedies to aid parents in their recovery from the shock.

### **Grief and Gender**

Research on medieval miracle stories from Central Europe, Italy and the British Isles would suggest that the stories differ from Swedish ones in one particular respect – that of gender differences in emotional expressions of bereavement.

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49 Sanders 1998; Talbot 2002, 66.

50 Talbot 2002, 1–21.

51 Talbot 2002, 169–181.

52 Gerrish & Bailey 2012; Arnold et al. 2007.

Gender differences are present in forms such as how emotions are expressed and, when these expressions differ from the expected gender roles, the person is mocked in British and Continental miracle stories.<sup>53</sup> This phenomenon of gender-specific expressions of bereavement or criticism of such behaviour is non-existent in my material. Both men and women weep publicly and often act together in order to take care of the deceased or pray to a particular saint. It seems that bereavement took different forms in medieval Sweden from other parts of Europe.

Why this is so can possibly be explained through modern gender studies on parental bereavement. Correlations have been found between gender and grief, and between how a person reacted and coped with extreme situations before the death of a child.<sup>54</sup> Gendered behaviour by the parent in the ways in which the father and mother are supposed to behave in a normal situation – where the mother is supposed to be more emotional in her expressions than the father – have consequences for how the process of bereavement is expressed emotionally.<sup>55</sup> If these correlations were also true for the medieval period, as Katajala-Peltomaa has indicated in line with my own analysis,<sup>56</sup> one can draw the conclusion that the gender roles of parents differed between parents in Scandinavia, where both men and women showed strong emotions, and the British Isles and Continental Europe where men adopted a less emotionally expressive behaviour than women.

## Exit Death: The Praying Parent

In this section, I will examine the ways in which these bereaved parents used their religiosity in terms of prayer to cope with the situation of loss. The key point in understanding medieval miracle stories is the fact that a miracle occurs and that God thereby acts directly in the world. Nonetheless, many studies of medieval miracles have focused instead on illness, behaviour and the statistics of the actors in these stories. But the very reason why these miracle stories were recorded and used in the promotion of presumed saints was religious. Miracles happened only to a few, and one could never know whether God wanted to perform a miracle or not, regardless of the severity of the situation and the depth of grief. This has always been one of the mysteries of Christianity, and even Jesus Christ himself did not cure all illness and did not revoke death for everyone. The reason for this cannot be understood in terms of theology; it must simply be accepted that it is beyond human capacity to know how God's reasons.

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<sup>53</sup> Finucane 2000, 151–158.

<sup>54</sup> Riley et al. 2007; Schwab 1996.

<sup>55</sup> Riley et al. 2007; Schwab 1996.

<sup>56</sup> Katajala-Peltomaa 2013.

## God and Saints as Healers

The prime example of healing throughout the history of Christianity has been God the Father himself performing miracles through his son Jesus Christ – healings often referred to and viewed as role models. In the New Testament, readers are told of two miracles Jesus performed for dying children and their parents. The first miracle can be found in Mark 5:21–43, where the twelve-year-old daughter of the Synagogue leader Jairus was brought back to life.<sup>57</sup> The second miracle can be found in Luke 7:11–17, where the only son of a widow from Nain had died and was about to be carried away when Jesus passed the widow.<sup>58</sup> Both stories tell of bereaved persons and Jesus asked the dead children to stand up – both were lying down when he spoke to them – and he then ensured that these resurrected children were helped in appropriate ways. The girl was given food and the boy was given back to his mother. Still, these were the only two miracles of this kind that Jesus performed. He must have seen a great many more dead and dying children, although he also brought the adult Lazarus back from his grave (John 11:1–44).

These stories of Jesus' ability to heal must have been known to lay people, as the most powerful stories of God's ability to act and heal the sick and the dead. The power of God as healer is recalled in the miracle stories, as well as God's power to perform miracles. In the miracles analysed in this paper, however, no references to these stories are made – either explicitly, such as recalling God's actions in these cases and the possibility of repeating these miracles, or implicitly through the imitation of these miracles in terms of *modus operandi* or using the same phrases. This gives authenticity to the stories since it is relatively easy to mimic Biblical miracles in miracle collections – something common to European collections, but almost non-existent in Scandinavian ones. In the anatomy of a miracle story, someone needs to pray to a saint or God, asking for a miracle, this prayer usually including some kind of offering in return for the miracle such as a votive gift to the shrine of the saint which has to be fulfilled once the miracle has occurred. Otherwise the illness could return.

## Parents in Prayer

In all the miracle stories analysed here, parents or someone related to the dying or dead child, prayed to the presumed saint. The majority of the 37 stories say only that the parents prayed for the dead or dying and that the miracle took place, whereas 11 (1 Birgitta, 2 Nicolaus Hermanni, 8 Katarina) explain more specifically how this

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57 Synopsis: Jesus asks why they are all crying and weeping, and tells the father that the girl is just sleeping, although Jairus' servants have said that the daughter has died (she is dying when Jairus asks Jesus for help) and calls for her to awaken again, with the famous words *talitha kum* ("little girl, get up"). The girl wakes up and Jesus asks for food for her.

58 Synopsis: Jesus tells the widow not to cry, touches the bier, and then tells the boy to stand up. The boy does so and begins to speak. Jesus then gives the boy back to his mother.

prayer was performed. The stories commonly describe the emotional expressions and gestures of the bereaved parent when he or she prayed (17 miracles in total: 5 Birgitta, 2 Nicolaus Hermanni, 10 Katarina). These emotions were often either submissive (humbleness) or lachrymose.

A typical example of how prayer was expressed can be found in a miracle story of Saint Birgitta of Sweden from somewhere between 1374 and 1390, where two children fell from their widowed mother's arms into a stream and could not be found.<sup>59</sup> The children were later discovered safe in the water, described "as if they have been resting on a bed of flowers". In the miracle story, the bereaved widow, having realised that she was about to lose her only children, cried to the saint with many tears and began to pray. The content of the prayer itself, in which the widow submitted herself in sorrow to the miraculous powers of God through Saint Birgitta of Sweden, was then summarised for the reader:<sup>60</sup>

It was about noon, when the woman, who saw that she was bereft of her children and had lost the comforts and hopes of her widowhood, called sobbing to the lady Birgitta that she – this honourable widow who for more than thirty years, long before her husband's death, with his consent had promised to live in chastity, who had lived a commendable life and in truth already seems to be inseparably united with her heavenly groom – that she ought to think it worthy to come to the aid of the abandoned and miserable widow, who promised to make a pilgrimage with the children to Vadstena if she could take them alive from the whirlpools of the water. She then wiped the tears away and saw that [...].<sup>61</sup>

Another quite common way of describing prayer is to present the thoughts of the bereaved parent when he or she began to think of the possibility of miraculous intervention. In the miracle story of the Blessed Bishop Nicolaus Hermanni of Linköping cited above, where a boy was dying and the parents prayed the standard sequence of Paternosters and Hail Marys, the father was described as thinking in terms of a miracle while praying for his boy as a dead person.<sup>62</sup> The father then made a vow to visit the late bishop's tomb, whereupon the boy came to life again. The way in which the praying father used his mind to voice another prayer whilst still reciting a standard prayer was something common and recommended in the Middle Ages.<sup>63</sup> The fact that the father mentioned this change in his thought illustrates his acceptance of doing so, and the recorder of the miracle made no remark concerning this.

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59 Collijn (ed.) 1924–1931, 125 (Miracle #30, Series "B").

60 Ibid, 125.

61 *"Et hora erat quasi sexta, cernens mulier se liberis exorbatam spemque consolationem viduitatis sue perijisse, dolorosis singultibus dominam Brigidam jnuocabat, vt illa venerabilis vidua, que triginta annis et eo amplius diu ante mortem mariti illo consenciente castitatem seruare vouerat et laudabiliter vixerat et celesto sponso iam inseparabiliter coniuncta vere creditur, desolate et misere vidue succurrere dignaretur, vouens se cum paruulis ad Wastenam peregre profecturam, si eos viuos de gurgitibus aquarum recipere posset. Deinde extergens lacrimas ab oculis vidit [...]."*

62 Schück (ed.) 1873–1895, 347–348 (Miracle #5).

63 Aldrin 2011, 59–64.



Two miracle stories of the Blessed Nicholas Hermanni discuss lot casting, a particular way to discern to whom to address a prayer for a miraculous intervention.<sup>64</sup> Lots were cast in a particular order to determine whom God wished to be the addressee for prayer.<sup>65</sup> When, as in this miracle story, the Blessed Bishop Nicolaus Hermanni of Linköping was selected by the lots, those at the house of the deceased began to pray to him and the miracle occurred. The process of lot casting is described by the miracle compiler as being according to the customs of the people, but with no remark on whether it was unacceptable behaviour and, accordingly, whether this was the way to discern the will of God. Lot casting was common in medieval Sweden and considered to be something good and in opposition to evil, since God's will was requested rather than the Devil's power.<sup>66</sup>

In all the miracle stories discussed here, no priests were present when the prayer for the miracle was made,<sup>67</sup> which is thus something which lay people did for themselves and which they were respected for and trusted to do.<sup>68</sup> In fact, nowhere in the entire miracle material of late medieval Sweden are there any remarks made that the prayer was inappropriate because of the lack of a priest,<sup>69</sup> suggesting that lay people in the Middle Ages, at least in Sweden, were not as dependent on the clergy for their religious practices as had been previously thought. Instead, bereaved parents had the opportunity to create their own prayers and to construct business-like agreements with presumed saints in return for a miracle.



Picture 4. After their son had fallen seriously ill, Leone Otasso and his wife presented the boy to Saints Aimo and Vermando so that he would be cured. This happened miraculously by divine intervention.

64 Schück (ed.) 1873–1895, 384–386 (Miracles #56, #58).

65 Aldrin 2011, 112–118; Fröjmark 1993, 98; Krötzl 2012.

66 Aldrin 2011, 112–118.

67 See also, Aldrin 2011, 109–144.

68 See also Aldrin 2011, 109–144; Källström 2011, 305–309.

69 See also Aldrin 2011, 109–144.

## The Miracle

When the miracle occurred, God had acted in that particular situation by bringing the child back to life. This is the epicentre of the miracle story narrative – where God's healing powers are proved and manifested. Although the miracle itself is not focused on in this paper, it is necessary to say something about what came after the prayer – the miracle itself and its aftermath. Unlike the biblical miracles and the ways in which such miracles occur, the miracles in the medieval stories are often a process rather than an instant healing. The stories often graphically relate how the child came to life again, limb by limb, and was later examined to show no vestiges of the illness or accident that led to death or, in the case of infants, that they instantly began to suckle again.

After the miracle had occurred, the votive promise made by the parents, often a visit or a gift to the tomb of the presumed saint, was fulfilled. A common feature of medieval miracle stories is that some did not fulfil their promises to the saint and were punished with even fiercer pains than before. However, in the case of bereaved parents in Swedish miracles, no parent is said not to have fulfilled the promise – perhaps they did not wish to risk their children's health. The miracles often also include specific information about witnesses such as names, villages and occupations in order to control the facts of the miracle.

## Religious Coping through Prayer

Little is related in the miracle stories of the actual prayer process in relation to the bereavement process, which is more often described in these stories. A glimpse of ordinary death preparation is given – of how bereaved parents prepared their dead child for the final rites of passage, the burial. The stories say little of clerical intervention and activity in this preparation, it being the parents and relatives themselves who prepare the dead and the dying. All of the stories also include prayer, sometimes not only to a particular saint for a miracle, but also standard prayers that were used throughout the life of a lay person in the Middle Ages. Prayer surrounded both the living and the dead in the process of dying.<sup>70</sup> No evidence is found for any use of the *ars moriendi* procedures for a dying person, where he prepares himself spiritually to enter heaven.<sup>71</sup> The dying children do not prepare themselves for their death; their parents react to their deaths through praying for a miracle.

If these miracle stories provide a glimpse of ordinary death preparations for deceased children, then much of what has previously been assumed regarding the use of *ars moriendi* procedures and extreme unction needs to be reconsidered.

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<sup>70</sup> Aldrin 2011, 109–144.

<sup>71</sup> For research on death preparation and extreme unction in medieval Sweden, see Fallberg Sundmark 2008.

Although religion provided ways to interpret and understand the world and the difficulties in life, none of the miracle stories tell of parents interpreting the death of their child in terms of religion. They all knew, or were told of, the possibility of praying to God for a miracle, but they did not accuse God or claim that He had taken away the life of the child. All deaths were described as natural facts, due to natural causes such as illness or fatal accidents. The parents were not complaining to God that the lives of their children were all too short, or that they were bereaved unjustly.

The religious context provides a strong framework of coping for the bereaved parents into which to place themselves and their dead children. They knew what had happened to their dead children and what was required of them to do – both in the short term (burial) and the long term (life as a bereaved person). Still, none of this took away the strong emotions of bereavement and nothing in the miracle stories tells of denial or neglecting such emotions.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to examine religious coping among parents in the Middle Ages through the use of Swedish miracle stories. Two aspects have been highlighted, that of bereavement expressions and that of coping through prayer.

We can now say of the first aspect, bereavement, that two different approaches have been found regarding the discoveries of death, depending on the speed of the events that led to the death of the child. When death occurred gradually, the reactions of the parents were less emotionally expressive than when death was sudden. The most usual way to deal with the deceased was to place the child in a separate room if available or on a bier, but it was also normal to leave the deceased for a couple of hours in order for him or her to recover from death through a miracle.

Catherine M. Sanders' and Kay Talbot's studies on parental bereavement in modern times have been used to analyse the physical and psychological aspects of the responses of the parents in the miracle stories. In this analysis, it has proved complicated to use a modern theory for the medieval period for bereavement, but several of the reactions described in Sanders' first phase of bereavement – shock – apply to the parents in the miracle story, such as disbelief in the reality of the death and confusion about how to continue after the realisation of bereavement. Another approach to bereavement and miracle stories can be found in the use of narratives as a psychological aid for the bereaved. Miracle stories fit this approach well, and can thus be understood as narratives constructed by the parents to understand and find strength in the face of what has happened – the hair's-breadth encounter with death.



Picture 5. Many worshippers expressed their gratitude to Saints Aimo and Vermando for their many miracles.

The parents' emotional reactions are described in a few miracle stories as strong and expressive, and both men and women grieve in similar ways. This situation contrasts with research on British and Continental European miracle stories and can be interpreted through a connection between emotional reaction to extreme situations before and after the moment of bereavement. In earlier research, gender differences have been identified which cannot be found in the Swedish miracle stories examined here. This might suggest that gender roles in medieval Sweden (and possibly Scandinavia) differ from those of Continental Europe and the British Isles.

We can now conclude of religious coping through prayer that the second emotional behaviour and gestures of the praying parent are occasionally described in the miracle stories. These stories depict the praying parent as either weeping or submissive towards the addressee of the prayer; that is, to the person revered as a saint. In two such stories, lot casting is described as a way to discern the will of God when the parents cannot decide to whom to address the prayer. The use of lot casting in these miracle stories was considered normal and accepted.

The miraculous recovery is often described as a process whereby life was regained limb by limb. This is, however, not the case for infants who immediately came to life and began to suckle from their mothers' breasts. In the miracle stories, no parent blamed God for the death of a child, considering it to be something that occurred naturally, in term of accidents or stillborn children. What is striking in these stories is the absence of priests providing extreme unction and of the then-popular manuals for dying, such as the *ars moriendi*. Instead, it seems that the laity were able to construct their own prayers, and in the end, receive miracles in the most crucial situation of all to a parent – the death of a child.



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