CHAPTER NINE

THREE’S A CROWD: WIVES, HUSBANDS, AND PRIESTS IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL CONFESSIONAL

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In 1412 in the deanery of Salisbury, five male parishioners charged their vicar, Alexander Champion, with multiple acts of sexual immorality. They accused him of committing adultery with Walter Luyde’s wife and John Shifford’s wife, of carrying on a two year affair with Alice, wife of William Burton, of sustaining a seven year affair with John Forst’s wife, of frequently impregnating his concubine in Salisbury, and—in a final charge—of soliciting “wives and servant girls” during confession at Lent.¹

These are familiar accusations. Christopher Harper-Bill has remarked that the “easiest way for any disgruntled parishioner to cause trouble for his priest was to initiate a rumour”—especially a rumor of sexual indiscretion.² Yet, whether falsified or not, the charges levied against Alexander Champion by the men of his parish accentuate a common problem faced by late medieval priests: how to meet confidentially with married female penitents without raising the suspicions of men.³ On the one hand, canon law required that priests hear the confessions of all parishioners, female as well as male, and guard the confidentiality of those confessions. On the other hand, because married women lived under the authority of husbands, their dependent status complicated


³ Because of women’s sexuality, meeting with all women was difficult for priests. Also, daughters and servant girls experienced similar problems as wives since they too lived under the authority of male household heads. Nonetheless, this article concentrates primarily on the problems arising with married female penitents. For more general information and historiography about the pastoral care of women, see Beth Allison Barr, The Pastoral Care of Women in Late Medieval England (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2008).
the confessional process. Thus, despite John Mirk’s exhortation for all parishioners, “be it husband, be it wife,” to confess their sins regularly to a priest, evidence suggests that his words would have been more easily said than done for both married female penitents and the priests who cared for them.4

**Late Medieval Confession**

Canon 21 of the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council, *Omnis utriusque sexus*, demanded that Christians of proper age make confession at least once a year to a priest.

> All the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment, should individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest at least once a year, and let them take care to do what they can to perform the penance imposed on them. Let them reverently receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least at Easter... Otherwise they shall be barred from entering a church during their lifetime and they shall be denied a Christian burial at death.5

Although this was not the beginning of mandated confession, *Omnis utriusque sexus* set a clear standard for both ordinary penitents and their priests that reverberated throughout late medieval pastoral literature.6 John Mirk emphasized in his fourteenth-century manual, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, that priests must impress on male and female parishioners the importance of confession.

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6 Thomas Tentler has noted that *Omnis utriusque sexus*, “was not the first legal act to require confession to the priest and it can in no sense be said to have invented the necessity of confession. Nevertheless it was momentous; and even if it was originally designed as a disciplinary canon to allow pastors to know their parishioners and watch for heresy, its effects were in fact broader. For the requirement of yearly confession now had the authority of Pope and council, who had prescribed powerful religious sanctions to back it up.” Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, 1977), p. 22. Karma Lochrie provides a good discussion of late medieval confession, especially the origins of private confession. Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia, 1999), pp. 24–42.