CHAPTER THREE

PUTTING ORDER TO DISORDER: ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN, THEIR PARENTS, AND THE CONSISTORY
IN REFORMATION GENEVA

Karen E. Spierling

Summary

The Genevan consistory went to great lengths to discover the identities of the parents of illegitimate children at the height of the Reformation, in order to ensure both that the parents publicly repented their act of *paillardise* and that the child was financially cared for. This chapter discusses three case studies involving accusations of *paillardise* and illegitimate children in order to illuminate the consistory’s main concerns; the challenges facing the consistory in enforcing Reformed morals in such cases; and some of the ways that personal relationships, particularly between masters and servants, could serve to obscure the truth of a case despite the consistory’s best efforts. The discussion demonstrates that, despite their limitations, the Genevan consistory records provide an as-yet unmined wealth of information to help us better understand how the Reformed community dealt with illegitimate children and their parents at a variety of levels.

On June 12, 1550, Françoys Humbert, servant of Sieur Marin Malliet, appeared before the Genevan consistory to answer questions about an illegitimate child he had fathered with another of Malliet’s servants. The consistory wanted to know why Humbert had reported that the child had been baptized in one village (Chancy, in Haute-Savoie), while the baby’s mother had given them the name of another place (Pougny, the neighboring village in Ain, France). In the brief entry about his appearance, Humbert’s reply seems somewhat scattered: the mother could not know the right answer, but he accepts the child as his own,
and he was already punished for this a year and a half. Just over a month later, on July 24, a woman named Noelle admitted to the consistory that her baby belonged to Sieur Marin Malliet. She had given birth, she said, in Collogny (in Genevan territory), but now said that she did not know where the child had been baptized. The consistory admonished her that she “had greatly offended” by giving the child away to the servant of her master. Five months later, on Christmas Day, the consistory remonstrated with François Humbert “regarding his rebellion and recognizing his error, after Messieurs have granted him grace, of having taken to himself the infant that was not his.” The record reports that “he well recognized his fault and cried mercy to God. He put his two knees to the ground.”

While the consistory records present this story in just three brief entries, the information provided there raises intriguing questions—and suggests some interesting answers—regarding the consistory’s dealings with parents of illegitimate children in Reformation Geneva. Based just on these records, we can tell that this case involved a pregnant servant; an illegitimate Genevan child born outside of Geneva; and a determined attempt—apparently temporarily successful—to conceal the paternity of the child. These entries indicate not only that one servant, François Humbert, was persuaded to assist his master in hiding the master’s involvement, but also that the impregnated servant was convinced to go along with the cover-up. Here, in a nutshell, we have the main themes that I would like to present: the involvement of servants, both male and female, in cases involving illegitimate children—an apparently common but understudied phenomenon in

---


2 R. Consist. 5:48v, 24 July 1550.

3 R. Consist. 5:96v, 25 December 1550.