



BROTHERS AND SISTERS
IN MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN
LITERATURE

CAROLYNE LARRINGTON

Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature

Carolyn Larrington



THE UNIVERSITY *of York*

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Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature

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For my brother David Larrington,
and for Christina Brandenburg

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This book is dedicated to my own sibling, my brother David, and to my former affine Tina Brandenburg.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>DNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (online resource)
EETS	Early English Text Society
ES	Extra Series
<i>FSN</i>	<i>Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda</i> , ed. Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols. (Reykjavík, 1954)
ÍF	Íslenzk fornrit
<i>L-G</i>	<i>Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation</i> , ed. N. J. Lacy <i>et al.</i> 5 vols (New York, 1993–6)
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
os	Ordinary Series
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. Migne (online resource)
<i>Saxo, GD</i>	Saxo Grammaticus, <i>Gesta Danorum</i> , online at: http://www2.kb.dk/elib/lit/dan/saxo/lat/or.dsr/index.htm
<i>Saxo, HD</i>	Saxo Grammaticus, <i>History of the Danes</i> , ed. H. Ellis-Davidson, trans. P. Fisher (Cambridge, 1998)
ss	Special Series

All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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INTRODUCTION

Why Siblings?

Sibling studies are the poor neglected stepchild of the history of the Western family. Interest in vertical relationships, in lineage and genealogies and in inter-generational strife has directed scholarly attention away from lateral ties, while Freudian paradigms have foregrounded mother-child bonds and the Oedipal acting-out of sons against fathers. The bond between brothers and sisters is, however, the relationship which lasts longest of all, from birth or shortly afterwards until death supervenes. From the beginning of the millennium historians of the family and literary scholars have been investigating sibling relationships in the post-medieval period, uncovering the social conditions which shape the sibling relationship and drilling down into the more abundant evidence of sibling emotions found in different kinds of post-medieval source.¹ Only in the last ten years, particularly in France, have historians embarked on detailed analysis of medieval sibling relations.² There has been even less investigation of brothers and sisters in the imaginative literature of the Middle Ages: it is this gap which this book aims to address.

The medieval family was, in many respects, as diverse in its formation as the modern family with its blends of half-, step-, full, adoptive and foster-children.³ Parental mortality rates, remarriages and expansion of the family group to increase the availability of labour were all factors that contributed to complex family structures and created distinctions amongst the cohort of siblings who regarded one another as brother or sister. Leonore Davidoff suggests that nowadays the individual is less likely to have a full brother or sister than at any time in earlier history, thanks to the prevalence of marital breakdown, new

¹ See L. Davidoff, *Thicker than Water: Siblings and their Relations 1780–1920* (Oxford, 2012); *Sibling Relations and the Transformations of European Kinship 1300–1900*, ed. C. Johnson and D. W. Sabeen (Oxford and New York, 2011); *Sibling Relations and Gender in the Early Modern World: Sisters, Brothers and Others*, ed. N. J. Miller and N. Yavneh (Aldershot, 2006); V. Sanders, *The Brother–Sister Culture in Nineteenth-Century Literature: from Austen to Woolf* (Basingstoke, 2002).

² For example, I. Réal, *Vies de saints, vie de famille: représentation et système de la parenté dans le royaume mérovingien [481–751] d’après les sources hagiographiques* (Turnhout, 2001); D. Lett, *Frères et sœurs: histoire d’un lien* (Paris, 2009), the special journal issue, *Frères et sœurs – Ethnographie d’un lien de parenté, Médiévales 54* (2008), ed. D. Lett, *Frères et sœurs: les liens adelphiques dans l’Occident antique et médiéval*, ed. S. Cassagnes-Brouquet and M. Yvernault (Turnhout, 2007), and *La parenté déchirée: les luttes intrafamiliales au Moyen Âge*, ed. M. Aurell (Turnhout, 2010).

³ See R. Edwards, L. Hadfield et al., *Who is a Sister and a Brother? Biological and Social Ties* (London, 2005).

household formation and innovations in reproductive technology.⁴ Nevertheless, in the modern West 80 per cent of individuals do have a sibling: siblings who live much longer than their medieval counterparts, where child mortality ran at around 50 per cent. The modern sibling relationship can persist over seventy or more years: a truly life-long bond. Especially in childhood, sibling relationships are crucially formative of individual identity; behaviour is learned from peers as much as from parents, especially when older siblings assume care-taking roles, and innate personality traits are emphasized by the drive for differentiation from one's brothers and sisters. Sibling position is thus as important a constituent of identity as vertical lineage. As the historian Michael Roper observes:

Too often, what goes missing from linguistic analyses is an adequate sense of the material: . . . of human experience formed through emotional relationships with others; and of that experience as involving a perpetual process of managing emotional impulses, both conscious and unconscious, within the self and in relation to others.⁵

Investigation of our cultural past invites us to attend to how siblings think and feel, and how this bears on their behaviour, and the cultural norms which are reinforced or interrogated by the actions of sibling individuals.

In the modern period, the management of emotional impulses can be uncovered in a variety of personal literary forms: in letters, journals, autobiographies and interviews. In earlier periods, emotion and its links to experience and to subjectivity must be excavated via all sorts of writing: from legal documents to sermons, sagas and romance. If we want to develop a more complex picture of medieval brothers and sisters within the families that shaped their identities, we must probe into literary depictions of siblinghood: for it is these which most fully demonstrate how, as Roper argues, 'the assimilation of cultural codes . . . [are] a matter of negotiation involving an active subject'.⁶ How siblings behave to one another is strongly inflected both by gender and by social class; processes of social change reconfigure sibling interactions. Thus Boccaccio chronicles how, within a mercantile urban environment, the fact that the family business is run from home exposes a young girl to an unsuitable sexual partner, to the chagrin of her brothers.⁷ The aristocratic sibling group, by contrast, both in the early and later medieval periods kept girls under close supervision and was thus better able to regulate sisterly sexuality. While some historical records and folk-tales fitfully illuminate the lives of siblings from the peasant classes,

⁴ Davidoff, *Thicker than Water*, pp. 1–2.

⁵ M. Roper, 'Slipping out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History', *History Workshop Journal* 59 (2005), 57–72 (p. 62).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 66–7.

⁷ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* (IV.3), cited from: http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/DecShowText.php?myID=novo405&lang=it; *Decameron*, trans. G. Waldman (Oxford, 1993), pp. 283–6.

it is predominantly the lives of aristocratic and, later, gentry and mercantile brothers and sisters which are the focus of high-culture literary texts.

Analysis of medieval siblinghood must of course rest on a thoroughly contextualized and historicized understanding of changing social conditions within and beyond the medieval family, and make use of all available sources. The literature of the Middle Ages often attends very closely to the relationship of brother and sister, laying bare sibling behaviours in their most dramatic forms as models to emulate, admire or avoid, and it opens up multiple perspectives on the sibling emotions – love, hate, rivalry, desire, nurturance and ambivalence – which underlie its narratives. The ways in which medieval people thought and felt, and the interaction of cognitive and emotional processes that generates the actions underpinning medieval stories, have become a major focus of recent research. While the ‘emotional turn’ originated among historians, the proposition that literary texts make a crucial contribution to our understanding of the history of medieval emotion has gained ground.⁸ In an early intervention in the field, I foregrounded the value of contemporary psychological theory in making sense of emotion, and its componential relationships with cognition and action, in medieval literary texts.⁹ This book develops that argument in relation to the imaginative treatment of sibling and quasi-sibling relationships. Psychological (and to a lesser extent) psychoanalytic theories are grounded in the biological, embodied nature of human beings and thus they propose the existence of emotional and cognitive continuities through historical time. There is a powerful consonance between our own unofficial understanding of sibling bonds – the stories we still tell ourselves about brothers and sisters, the sibling stories of the past, and contemporary psychological and psychoanalytic formulations of sibling dynamics.

The ‘sibling turn’, which has come about in psychoanalysis and in developmental and cross-cultural psychology in recent years, yields different kinds of insight into sibling stories. It draws attention both to continuities and dissonances between modern understandings of the sibling and the ways in which the relationship was framed in the medieval period. Such approaches must be intelligently applied: it is debatable how far the particular claims of psychoanalysis to observe universal structures in the human psyche across

⁸ There is a growing literature on methodologies for understanding emotion in both history and literature: see for example U. Frevert, *Emotions in History – Lost and Found* (Budapest and New York, 2011); the EMMA website: <http://emma.hypotheses.org> and its associated publications, such as *Le sujet des émotions au moyen âge*, ed. P. Nagy and D. Boquet (Paris, 2009) and *La chair des émotions, Médiévales* 61 (2011), ed. D. Boquet, P. Nagy and L. Moulinier-Brogi. P. C. Hogan’s two important books, *The Mind and its Stories* (Cambridge, 2009), and *What Literature Teaches us about Emotion* (Cambridge, 2011), do not specifically treat medieval literature texts, but they make a compelling case for the value of literary texts for understanding emotions in the past.

⁹ C. Larrington, ‘Some Recent Developments in the Psychology of Emotion and their Relevance to the Study of the Medieval Period’, *Early Medieval Europe* 10 (2001), 251–6.

very different social and cultural conditions can be profitably applied to a premodern self. Nor is it clear that the highly varied cultural conditions of, for example, Oceania, can bear comparison in many respects with medieval European societies. Nevertheless, psychoanalytic practitioners, developmental and cross-cultural psychologists, and anthropologists all offer theoretical insights into childhood- and adult-sibling relations which find productive resonance in medieval texts. Medieval writers also found models for and discussion of sibling ethics in the Bible and in theological writings. Below I outline some of the contributions of these modern disciplines to the sibling thinking in this book, followed by a summary of the principal brother-sister themes of medieval theology.

Psychoanalytic Theory and the Sibling

The psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell's work has foregrounded and expanded the post-Freudian implications of sibling interaction. Freud had relatively little to say on the subject, beyond noting sibling rivalry, both as a general phenomenon and a personal experience, Mitchell argues.¹⁰ He recognized that his adult friendships, in particular with the Berlin ear, nose and throat surgeon Wilhelm Fliess, were generally predicated on the ambivalences of the sibling relationship, noting his desire for 'an intimate friend and a hostile enemy', and that sometimes these roles would 'come together in a single individual'.¹¹ In his early correspondence with Fliess, Freud foregrounded the crucial importance of sibling relations, but by the time he came to elaborate the Oedipus complex, he seemed to have left sibling relations behind; desire and violence were attributed to the castration complex rather than to the tensions of siblinghood. Although there are a few early references to brothers and sisters in his work, such as the striking observation 'In none of my women patients . . . have I failed to come upon this dream of the death of a brother or sister, which tallies with an increase in hostility', Freud does not theorize sibling rivalry in any detail.¹² Nevertheless, he was well aware of sibling hatred as a contributing factor in neurosis; he records the repeated request of his patient Little Hans, as reported by Hans's father, that his mother should drown his baby sister in the bath.¹³

In the last decades, attention has turned from the Freudian triangle of father-

¹⁰ See J. Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Relations on the Human Condition* (Harmondsworth, 2000) and *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Cambridge, 2003). S. Sherwin-White, 'Freud on Brothers and Sisters: A Neglected Topic', *Journal of Child Psychotherapy* 33 (2007), 4-20, demonstrates that Freud engaged both more closely and more widely with sibling issues than Mitchell credits.

¹¹ S. Freud, *On the Interpretation of Dreams*, Standard Edition vols 4 and 5 (London, 1953), p. 483.

¹² Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 253.

¹³ See Mitchell, *Mad Men*, p. 81; also M. Rustin, 'Taking Account of Siblings - A View from Child Psychotherapy', *Journal of Child Psychotherapy* 33 (2007), 21-35.

mother-baby to focus on the intricate web of sibling bonds. Juliet Mitchell's two books have broken this new ground: they compellingly redirect attention to the sibling, not simply by identifying childhood trauma, but in charting continuing sibling effects in adult life. In *Mad Men and Medusas* (1999) Mitchell argues that the sibling bonds forged in the nursery lay the groundwork for other lateral or peer relationships, including those with spouses and with in-laws. In *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (2003), Mitchell pays particular attention to gender, making clear that passionate love, desire (the 'polymorphous perversity' of infant sexuality) and violent hostility can be attributed to the sister as well as the brother. Identifying 'the three faces of the sister who both cares for and destroys: the lateral would-be murderer, the nurse and the lawgiver' (recurrent aspects of the sister in the texts considered in this book), she investigates the roles available to sisters in literature as well as in life.¹⁴ Mitchell offers three central conclusions about the sibling relationship. First, she charts the intensity and ambivalences of sibling relationship: 'the adored sibling, who is loved with all the urgency of the child's narcissism is also loathed as its replacement'.¹⁵ Second, she emphasizes the persistence of conflicted sibling relationships into adulthood. Third, she illuminates how sibling ambivalences are projected on to spouses, affines and peers, noting that 'in a world where siblings . . . flourish, we can see their importance not only in themselves but for all lateral relationships'.¹⁶ As the first social relationship is the sibling one, it sets the pattern for other social relations. Ego-development takes place as a result of interaction with peers rather than with parents; that struggle for identity differentiation is revisited when the sibling marries and a new brother- or sister-in-law is added to the sibling cohort.

Gender is particularly salient in the early years. While the birth of the younger sibling makes the boy fear that he has lost the power he was able to wield as 'His Majesty the Baby', according to Mitchell, a girl 'dreads feeling confirmed in her weakness and lack of social value'.¹⁷ This fear of displacement is not limited to same-sex sibling pairs; cross-sex siblings are equally traumatized by the arrival of a new baby. Reflecting on the Antigone myth, Luce Irigaray assesses the brother-sister relationship as reciprocal only insofar as it stimulates the fear of mutual annihilation, 'Et chacun(e) bientôt reconnaîtra qu'en son égal(e) était aussi bien son pire ennemi, sa négation, sa mort' ('And each will soon realize that his or her equal is also his or her worst enemy, negation, and death').¹⁸ More positively, Irigaray also identifies a recurrent role for sisters

¹⁴ Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 57. Antigone, as we shall see, is a frequent focus for discussion of normative sisterly loyalties (see pp. 95–7, 153 below).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225. See also T. Apter, *The Sister Knot* (New York and London, 2007), p. 179.

¹⁷ Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 71.

¹⁸ L. Irigaray, 'L'éternelle ironie de la communauté', in *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris, 1974), pp. 266–81 (p. 276); 'The Eternal Irony of the Community', in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G. Gill (Ithaca NY, 1985), pp. 214–26 (p. 222). See chapter three, pp. 90–2.

as their brothers' memory-keepers; as we shall see, sisters often arrogate to themselves the mission of creating and maintaining a saintly brother's cult.¹⁹ Mitchell herself tentatively discusses the political oppression of women by their brothers as originating in sibling trauma.²⁰ 'Fratrarchy', the oppression of women by their brothers, has been identified chiefly as a post-Enlightenment phenomenon, as a move which extends concepts of equality and fraternity to one gender only.²¹ Yet long before the eighteenth century, and consequent upon high adult mortality rates, medieval brothers habitually wielded as much power over their sisters as their fathers did. Marrying off a sister could absorb family assets in the provision of a dowry, or augment them through the payment of a bride-price. The family hoped to benefit from exchanging a woman with another family, bringing their interests into closer alliance and creating homosocial bonds between male coevals.

Ambivalences towards the sibling, feelings in which 'sibling sex and death ... are intricately entwined', must be resolved; the child must forge an individual identity for him- or herself, a task of psychological differentiation entrenched in deep-rooted concepts of sameness and difference.²² Psychoanalysts regard this work as potentially traumatic, 'but in most cases these experiences will be healed and the dread and shock will turn into hate and love, rivalry and friendship'; the child will learn to acknowledge that there is room for the next in line.²³ 'Borderwork': the establishment of the boundaries of identity, the deliberate selection of different roles or personality traits to distinguish oneself from one's siblings, is crucial to identity formation. And so siblings choose, consciously or unconsciously, to carve out different paths through life. Brothers and sisters exist in an eternally present relationship, patrolling the boundaries of sameness and difference with respect to one another, while childhood behavioural patterns persist or recur throughout the lifespan. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the Western nuclear family generates historically unchanging psychological structures of hostility and affection, of anxiety and ambivalence.²⁴ The sibling's task in developing his or her identity is to learn to assimilate these feelings, to accommodate the 'next in line' and, pre-eminently, to find ways of negotiating the principles of differentiation and substitutability both on an internal psychological level and as aspects of social existence.

¹⁹ See below, p. 92.

²⁰ Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 71.

²¹ See J. F. MacCannell, *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy* (London, 1991); C. Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 33–53, for fraternal oppression as an underinvestigated aspect of patriarchy.

²² Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 48; p. 190.

²⁴ See chapter one, p. 22, for demographic evidence suggesting that medieval households tended to contain two generations at most; the multi-generational medieval household is, as a consequence of low life-expectancy, particularly in plague-years, not borne out by the data.

Developmental Psychology and Siblings

Psychologists turned their attention to childhood sibling relations from the 1970s onwards, probing the ways in which older children react to the arrival of a new baby and in which sibling alliances shift and reform during later childhood and adolescence. Judy Dunn and her associates' research has confirmed the extreme and conflicted nature of sibling emotion among toddlers and teens; as one mother astutely commented to investigators, 'It comes down to love and hate, doesn't it?'²⁵ The toddler reacts to the arrival of the new sibling with rage and jealousy, 'feeling[s] of envy, primitive and horrible', but also with intense love, interest and loyalty.²⁶ The sibling is the first person to whom the child relates as a social being, with whom it works out how to play, how to negotiate the sharing of possessions, and how to relate to the parents; it forms shifting and strategic alliances with all members of the sibling group. Ambivalence is inherent from the outset in psychological characterizations of the sibling relationship.

Longitudinal studies trace how sibling bonds develop over an entire lifetime; these of course require around seventy years of sustained research, and so are significantly fewer in number. Although they lay different emphases on the emotions and behaviours of siblings from those foregrounded in psychoanalytical models, psychologists broadly agree that paradoxical drives and emotions – love and hate, rivalry and loyalty, nurturing and the desire for autonomy – continue to characterize the sibling bond through different life stages. Stephen Bank and Michael Kahn observe that while 'loyalty is a major theme or dimension of sibling relationships', it coexists with 'rivalry, conflict and competition' across the life-span.²⁷ Adult siblings still struggle to define themselves against their other siblings, repeatedly having to assert 'I am me, I am not you'. Meanwhile, others inside or outside the family may regard siblings as interchangeable: if one sibling is unwilling or unable to undertake a commitment regarded as a benefit for the whole family, such as taking over the family business, caring for an elderly – or younger – relative, or, in some cultures, entering into a marriage alliance, another sibling may be regarded as an acceptable substitute, irrespective of the individual's own views of the matter. The work of the sibling, particularly one of the same sex, is to differentiate him- or herself from the rest of the sibling group. This may be achieved through complementarity: promoting traits and developing identities which overlap minimally with other siblings' spheres of interest. Deidentification is divisive, a deliberate choice to be as unlike other siblings as possible. This strategy can

²⁵ J. Dunn and C. Kendrick, ed., *Siblings: Love, Envy and Understanding* (London, 1982), p. 208.

²⁶ Dunn and Kendrick, ed. *Siblings*; Apter, *Sister Knot*, p. 6; S. Bank and M. Kahn, 'Intense Sibling Loyalties', in *Sibling Relationships: Their Nature and Significance across the Lifespan*, ed. M. Lamb and B. Sutton-Smith (Hillsdale NJ and London, 1982), pp. 251–67.

²⁷ Bank and Kahn, 'Intense Sibling Loyalties', p. 251; cf. I. A. Connidis, 'Siblings as Friends in Later Life', *American Behavioural Scientist* 33 (1989), 81–93.

generate as much conflict as the rivalry caused by making identical life-choices; understood as rejection of all that the other sibling(s) stand for, it provokes extreme hostility. Counter-identification, a differentiation strategy which lies between complementarity and deidentification, often mediates competition successfully; the borderline so keenly patrolled by siblings is less likely to be infringed when counter-identities have been negotiated.²⁸

'The continuing existence of a blood tie is taken as indicative of the continuing existence of a social relationship between the siblings', notes Graham Allen.²⁹ The sibling cannot opt out of his or her siblinghood, within neither medieval nor modern culture. Unlike friends, a sibling is a sibling for life: severance of the relationship is problematic.³⁰ Siblings can be mobilized when needed, turned to in times of crisis; yoked together by biological and legal genealogy, the family functions as a moral unit and, at the same time, a network of social relationships, each of which constrains and structures other relationships.³¹ As in the medieval period, modern Western society maintains distinctions between full, half-, step-, adoptive and fictive siblings. Children do not necessarily live in the same household as their biological siblings; they may live with half- or step-siblings. Today's blended families raise similar questions about the relevance 'of culture, language, interpretation and subjectivity to constructing definitions, and social and emotional experiences, of who is a sibling, rather than a self-evident, biological or legal, state'.³² Powerful affective bonds, both positively and negatively inflected, exist between half- or step-siblings, even when, in the medieval past, they enjoyed very different legal statuses and varying inheritance prospects.

Sibling roles vary over the course of medieval and modern lifetimes; yet the developmental patterns for contemporary siblings are markedly similar to those of medieval brothers and sisters. Sibling caretaking tends to be informal, delegated by the parents on a temporary basis, often to the oldest sister; essential social skills and values are transmitted from older to younger child.³³ Coalitions and conspiracies are formed among siblings in order to deal with parents; children mediate between parents and other siblings, explaining

²⁸ See C. J. Moser, R. Jones *et al.*, 'The Impact of the Sibling in Clinical Practice: Transference and Countertransference Dynamics', *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 42 (2005), 267-78; M. Charles, 'Sibling Mysteries: Enactment of Unconscious Fears and Fantasies', *Psychoanalytic Review* 86 (1999), 877-901, and S. Bank and M. Kahn, *The Sibling Bond* (New York, 1982), pp. 104-11.

²⁹ G. Allen, 'Sibling Solidarity', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 39 (1977), 177-84 (p. 179).

³⁰ T. R. Lee, J. A. Mancini and J. W. Maxwell, 'Sibling Relationships in Adulthood: Contact Patterns and Motivations', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 52 (1990), 431-40.

³¹ Allen, 'Sibling Solidarity', p. 180.

³² Edwards *et al.*, *Who is a Sister and a Brother?*, p. 3.

³³ See V. G. Cicirelli, 'Sibling Relationships in Adulthood: A Life Span Perspective', in *Aging in the 1980s*, ed. L. W. Poon (Washington DC, 1980), pp. 455-62, and A. Goetting, 'The Developmental Tasks of Siblingship over the Life Cycle', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 48 (1986), 703-14.