

‘From a woman’s point of view’: the Presbyterian archive as a source for women’s and gender history in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland

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ABSTRACT. *This article responds to ‘An agenda for women’s history in Ireland, 1500–1900’ by highlighting the explanatory potential of the Presbyterian archive in extending and reshaping our understanding of women, gender and the family in Ireland. Discussed here as the ‘Presbyterian archive’, the records of the Presbyterian church offer a tantalising insight into the intimate worlds of women and men in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland. Although Presbyterians were a minority religious community in Ireland, their records provide much more than a marginalised picture. Instead, the Presbyterian archive casts fresh light on the wider Irish evidence, enriching our knowledge of the everyday lives of women and men in Ireland. The article begins by introducing the Presbyterian archive and the community responsible for its creation. Next, it considers how the Presbyterian archive both meets and advances the aims of the ‘Agenda’ and reveals what it can tell us about the lives of women and men as gendered subjects. Overall, the article underlines the importance of the Presbyterian archive as a source for Irish historians because it underscores why all history is gender history.*

In 1992, Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O’Dowd and Maria Luddy presented their ‘Agenda for women’s history in Ireland, 1500–1900’. Writing in response to the increasing popularity of women’s and gender history outside of Ireland, they drew attention to the slower paced adaption and, at times, outright dismissal of these frameworks by Irish historians. Rejecting the views of some scholars that women’s history was concerned solely with ‘women’s issues’, they emphasised the ‘major challenge’ that studying women posed to the shape of ‘mainstream Irish history’.¹ As a blueprint for future research, the ‘Agenda’ drew attention to underexplored archives and caches of sources that could illuminate overlooked and under-researched aspects of women’s lives. Once this recovery work had been completed, they argued that Irish scholars would be in a position to reconceptualise and reassess fixed narratives in Irish historical scholarship. As they astutely observed, ‘the history of women is also the history of men’.² Studying Irish women would cast new light on the experiences of men, thereby challenging current historical

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¹ Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O’Dowd and Maria Luddy, ‘An agenda for women’s history in Ireland, 1500–1900’, *I.H.S.*, xxviii, no. 109 (May 1992), pp 1–2.

² *Ibid.*, pp 2–3, 37.

thinking on Irish society more broadly. In the thirty years since the publication of the 'Agenda', our knowledge of women's lives has advanced significantly. We now know much about the lived experiences of lay women in Ireland: the making and breaking of their marriages; their experiences of motherhood and family life; and their roles in the household, politics and work.³ As Maeve O'Riordan and I recently pointed out, scholars in Ireland continue to work at the cutting edge of the discipline, using the 'Agenda' as a guide.⁴

The explanatory potential of religion as a force that determined the lives of women (and men) in Ireland is a recurrent theme in the 'Agenda'. Religion not only informed expectations of women in Irish society, it also shaped the rhythms of their everyday lives. Almost every aspect of daily life was touched in some way by religion: the rituals of reproduction and marriage; attitudes towards child-rearing; and patterns of work, education and philanthropy. Accessing these experiences, however, was difficult because of issues in both the quantity and quality of surviving primary source material. The destruction of the Public Record Office in 1922 and the subsequent loss of many of the records belonging to Ireland's ecclesiastical courts had left a glaring gap in historical research. Set up in every diocese across Ireland, these courts were utilised by women and men from across the social and religious spectrum. These courts dealt with issues that impacted every aspect of women's (and men's) lives in Ireland. As Mary O'Dowd later noted, the loss of these records has had a profound impact on the shape of women's history and the study of the family in Ireland.⁵

The 'Agenda' also pointed to the uneven attention that had been paid to the female Catholic religious in Ireland, noting that the experiences of women from other religious persuasions needed to be investigated further.⁶ Protestant minorities in Ireland, whose church court records had survived in greater quantities, were, therefore, singled out by the 'Agenda' as fruitful avenues for research. In particular, the records of the Presbyterian church were highlighted as a ripe source for analysis 'from a women's point of view' and how they held the potential to uncover attitudes to women and sexuality.⁷ The relationship that Irish women had with sex and sexuality was highlighted in the 'Agenda' as a large gap in knowledge more broadly. Questions were raised about women's attitudes to sexual activity, the ways in

³ The literature is now impressively rich. See, among others, Maria Luddy and Mary O'Dowd, *Marriage in Ireland, 1660–1925* (Cambridge, 2020); Diane Urquhart, *Irish divorce: a history* (Cambridge, 2020); Leanne McCormick, *Regulating sexuality: women in twentieth-century Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 2009); Elaine Farrell, *'A most diabolical deed': infanticide and Irish society, 1850–1900* (Manchester, 2013); Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Mother and child: maternity and child welfare in Dublin, 1922–60* (Manchester, 2007); Sarah-Anne Buckley, *The cruelty man: child welfare, the N.S.P.C.C. and the state in Ireland, 1889–1956* (Manchester, 2013); Mary Hatfield, *Growing up in nineteenth-century Ireland: a cultural history of middle-class childhood and gender* (Oxford, 2019).

⁴ Leanne Calvert and Maeve O'Riordan, 'Introduction. Women and the family in Ireland: new directions and perspectives, 1550–1950' in *Women's History: The Journal of the Women's History Network*, xv, no. 2 (summer, 2020), p. 3.

⁵ Mary O'Dowd, 'Men, women and children in Ireland, 1500–1730' in Jane Ohlmeyer (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Ireland*, ii, 1550–1730 (Cambridge, 2018), p. 298; Mary O'Dowd, 'Marriage breakdown in Ireland, c.1660–1857' in Niamh Howlin and Kevin Costello (eds), *Law and the family in Ireland, 1800–1950* (London, 2017), pp 7–8.

⁶ MacCurtain, O'Dowd & Luddy, 'Agenda', pp 21–3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 12, 19.

which they managed reproduction, the link between religion and the life cycle, and the power relationships that mediated family life.⁸

Although women's history in Ireland is no longer in its pioneering stages, there is still significant work to be done. Thirty years on, our knowledge of how religious belief shaped the lives of Irish women (and men) continues to be unbalanced. Owing to the greater availability of source material, we know much more about the everyday experiences of women who belonged to the Anglican elite than we do for other religious traditions.⁹ Outside of work on the female religious in Ireland, little work has been undertaken on Catholic women more generally, particularly for the period before the eighteenth-century.¹⁰ Advances have been made in relation to Presbyterian women; however, gaps remain. While studies of Presbyterian women have emerged, the focus has been on a small number of female 'notables' who made a tangible impact on the world around them.¹¹ Moreover, while the experiences of Presbyterian women have been included in broader histories of their church or in relation to marriage, the gendered contours of their lives have yet to receive sustained attention in their own right.¹²

⁸ Ibid., pp 28–9.

⁹ The historiography of the Anglican elite is rich: see, for example, A. P. W. Malcomson, *The pursuit of the heiress: aristocratic marriage in Ireland, 1740–1840* (Belfast, 2006); Deborah Wilson, *Women, marriage and property in wealthy landed families in Ireland, 1750–1850* (Manchester, 2009); Rachel Wilson, *Elite women in ascendancy Ireland, 1690–1745* (Woodbridge, 2015); Maeve O'Riordan, *Women of the country house in Ireland, 1860–1914* (Liverpool, 2018); Marie-Louise Jennings and Gabrielle M. Ashford (eds), *The letters of Katherine Conolly, 1707–1747* (Dublin, 2018).

¹⁰ Frances Nolan, *The Jacobite duchess: Frances Jennings, Duchess of Tyrconnell, c.1649–1731* (Woodbridge, 2021); eadem, "'The cat's paw': Helen Arthur, the act of resumption and *The Popish pretenders to the forfeited estates in Ireland, 1700–03*" in *I.H.S.*, xlii, no. 162 (Nov. 2018), pp 225–43; Erin Bishop, *The world of Mary O'Connell, 1778–1836* (Dublin, 1999); S. J. Connolly, *Priests and the people in pre-Famine Ireland, 1780–1845* (Dublin, 1982).

¹¹ Presbyterian women like Martha McTier, Mary Ann McCracken and Olivia Elder have been the focus of different studies: see, among others, Catriona Kennedy, 'Womanish epistles? Martha McTier, female epistolarity and late eighteenth-century Irish radicalism' in *Women's History Review*, xiii, no. 4 (2004), pp 649–68; *The Drennan-McTier letters*, ed. Jean Agnew (3 vols, Dublin, 1998–9); Mary McNeill, *The life and times of Mary Ann McCracken, 1770–1866: a Belfast panorama* (Belfast, 1988); Priscilla Metscher, 'Mary Anne McCracken: a critical Ulsterwoman within the context of her times' in *Études irlandaises*, xiv, no. 2 (1989), pp 143–58; John Gray, *Mary Ann McCracken, 1770–1866: feminist, revolutionary and reformer* (Belfast, 2020); Nancy J. Curtin, 'Women and eighteenth-century Irish republicanism' in Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd (eds), *Women in early modern Ireland*, (Dublin, 1991), pp 133–44; *The poems of Olivia Elder*, ed. Andrew Carpenter (Dublin, 2017); Andrew Carpenter, 'Olivia Elder: poor, poetess and ancient maid' in *History Ireland*, xxv, no. 4 (July/Aug. 2017), pp 20–23.

¹² Examples include: Andrew R. Holmes, *The shaping of Ulster Presbyterian belief and practice, 1770–1840* (Oxford, 2006); Mary O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland, 1500–1800* (Harlow, 2005); Luddy & O'Dowd, *Marriage in Ireland*; O'Dowd, 'Marriage breakdown', pp 7–23; Maria Luddy, 'Marriage, sexuality and the law in Ireland' in Eugenio F. Biagini and Mary E. Daly (eds), *The Cambridge social history of modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2018), pp 344–62; Leanne Calvert, 'Love, life and the family in the Ulster Presbyterian community, 1780–1844' (Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University Belfast, 2015) eadem, "'Your marage will make a change with them all, when you get another famely": illegitimacy, parenthood and siblinehood in Ireland, c. 1759–1832' in *English*

Taking the ‘Agenda’ as its point of departure, the following article partly redresses this imbalance by underlining the importance of the Presbyterian archive in reshaping our understanding of women, gender and the family in Ireland. It is split into three parts. It begins by introducing the Presbyterian archive and provides background information on the community who created it. Next, it considers how the Presbyterian archive meets the aims of the ‘Agenda’, drawing attention to what it tells us about women’s intimate lives from a ‘woman’s point of view’. The final section explores how the Presbyterian archive advances the aims of the agenda, considering it as a source for writing the gendered history of men. Overall, the article reveals how Presbyterian sources present a major challenge to mainstream Irish history because it underscores why all history is gender history.

I

Presbyterianism arrived in Ireland in the early seventeenth century, brought over by Scottish settlers. Successive waves of Scottish migrants over the following century soon created a strong Presbyterian presence in the province of Ulster, situated in the north-east counties of Ireland.¹³ The Presbyterian population of Ulster swelled from 100,000 in 1691 to approximately 642,356 by 1835.¹⁴ While Presbyterians were the largest religious grouping in Ulster, they were a minority in Ireland as a whole.¹⁵ Their numerical superiority was rivalled by adherents of the Roman Catholic Church, who made up between three-quarters and four-fifths of Ireland’s population in the early eighteenth century.¹⁶ The most powerful religious denomination in Ireland was the Anglican Church of Ireland. Representing the interests of the Protestant elite, the Church of Ireland acted as the arm of the state and only its members could access political power and enjoy

Historical Review, (published online 20 Sept. 2022, DOI: 10.1093/ehr/ceac166); eadem, ‘Objects of affection? Materialising courtship, love and sex in Ireland, c. 1780–1830’ in *Cultural and Social History*, xix, no. 3 (Apr. 2022), pp 247–63; eadem, “‘I am friends wt you & do entertain no malice’”: discord, disputes and defamation in Ulster Presbyterian church courts, c. 1700–1838’ in Niamh Howlin and Kevin Costello (eds), *Law and religion in Ireland, 1700–1970*, (Cham, Switzerland, 2021), pp 185–209; eadem, “‘A more careful tender nurse cannot be than my dear husband’”: reassessing the role of men in pregnancy and childbirth in Ulster, 1780–1838’ in *Journal of Family History*, xlii, no. 1 (2017), pp 22–36; eadem, “‘Do not forget your bit wife’”: love, marriage and the negotiation of patriarchy in Irish Presbyterian marriages, 1780–1850’ in *Women’s History Review*, xxvi, no. 3 (2017), pp 433–54.

¹³ Holmes, *Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian*; R. F. G. Holmes, *Our Irish Presbyterian heritage* (Belfast, 1985), pp 3–7; Ian McBride, ‘Presbyterians in the penal era’ in *Bullán*, i (1994), p. 74; D. M. MacRaid and Malcolm Smith, ‘Migration and emigration, 1600–1945’ in Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds), *Ulster since 1600: politics, economy and society* (Oxford, 2013), pp 141–4.

¹⁴ K. P. Conway, ‘The Presbyterian ministry of Ulster in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a prosopographical study’ (Ph.D. thesis, Q.U.B., 1997), p. 26; S. J. Connolly, *Religion and society in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dundalk, 1985), p. 3.

¹⁵ Connolly, *Religion and society*, p. 3.

¹⁶ See S. J. Connolly, *Divided kingdom: Ireland, 1630–1800* (Oxford, 2008), p. 249; idem, *Religion, law and power: the making of Protestant Ireland, 1660–1760* (Oxford, 1992), p. 147.

full civil rights.¹⁷ Those who dissented, such as Presbyterians, suffered legal discrimination as a result.

In keeping with its Scottish heritage, Presbyterianism was supervised by a hierarchy of three church courts. In descending order of power, these included: the synod or general assembly, the presbytery and the kirk session. While each of these courts were responsible for a particular area of church business, all were involved to some degree in the operation of church discipline. The types of cases that came before the church courts fell into three broadly defined categories: sexual offences, including fornication and adultery; social and religious offences, such as intoxication, brawling and defamation; and marriage irregularities, like bigamy and irregular marriage. At the meetings of the courts, a clerk was appointed to keep minutes of proceedings. This role was usually fulfilled by the minister and the minutes were designed not only to ensure consistency in practice but to create a tangible record for future reference. The term 'Presbyterian archive' is used here to refer to the minute books of the Presbyterian church courts.

Discipline cases usually came to the notice of the church courts through gossip, rumour and the direct reporting of misbehaviour by the local community. Presbyterian women and men used their eyes, ears and tongues to hold erring members of their community to account for transgressing social and moral norms.¹⁸ In Ireland, the communal nature of Presbyterian church discipline was even more pronounced. It is important to remember that Presbyterianism was a religious minority in Ireland and that its church courts had no legal mandate. Presbyterian women and men who submitted to church discipline did so of their volition — either to secure access to church privileges for themselves or their children, or because of a deep commitment to their faith. Adherence to Presbyterian discipline may have been voluntary, but the overwhelming majority did submit to church censure.¹⁹

The processes involved in church discipline were outlined in a number of documents. The general assembly of the Church of Scotland published a series of pamphlets that provided guidance to the church courts on how to proceed in discipline cases. The *Form of process*, published in 1707, set the standard for determining punishments in specific cases.²⁰ Presbyterians in Ireland broadly followed this model and in 1825 published a summary of their own disciplinary process in a section of their constitution, known as the *Code*.²¹ The *Code* drew a distinction between offences that were misdemeanours and could be handled privately by

¹⁷ D.W. Hayton, 'Presbyterians and the confessional state: the sacramental test as an issue in Irish politics, 1704–1780' in *Bulletin of the Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland*, xxvi, (1997), p. 16; McBride, 'Presbyterians in the penal era', p. 74.

^[17] Connolly, *Religion, law and power*, p. 176.

¹⁸ The role of gossip and family is covered in Leanne Calvert, "[T]o recover his reputation among the people of God": sex, religion and the double standard in Presbyterian Ireland, c.1700–1838' in *Gender & History* (online first, June 2022), pp 1–18.

¹⁹ Andrew Blaikie and Paul Gray, 'Archives of abuse and discontent? Presbyterianism and sexual behaviour during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' in R. J. Morris and Liam Kennedy (eds), *Ireland and Scotland: order and disorder, 1600–2000* (Edinburgh, 2005), p. 65; Holmes, *Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian*, pp 166–72.

²⁰ Holmes, *Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian*, p. 170; Katie Barclay, 'Marriage, sex and the Church of Scotland: exploring non-conformity amongst the lower orders' in *Journal of Religious History*, xliii, no. 2 (June 2019), p. 169.

²¹ The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, *The constitution and discipline of the Presbyterian church: with a Directory for the celebration of ordinances, and the performance of*

the session, and those that threatened the cohesiveness of the community, and which, therefore, potentially merited a public rebuke. Sins that included ‘prophane swearing, sabbath-breaking, drunkenness, quarreling, undutifulness to parents or similar offences’ were to be handled privately by the minister or eldership. Such cases could be resolved without public notice by the individual showing signs of sorrow for their past behaviour and their promise to amend for the future.²² Offenders who continued unrepentant, or in cases where their offence was aggravated by other charges, would be suspended from the church ordinances of communion and infant baptism.²³ For these offences, suspension from church privileges was the last resort. The same leniency was not afforded to ‘fornication, slander, habitual drunkenness and other gross offences’.²⁴ These were to be immediately investigated by the session and those proved guilty of such ‘heinous sins’ were to be suspended from church privileges.²⁵ Fornication was singled out as being ‘peculiarly injurious to the best interests of society’, and the *Code* advised that offenders should appear before the session or congregation to offer repentance.²⁶

The method of punishment in all these cases was at the discretion of the kirk session. As was the case in Scotland, the Presbyterian church courts in Ireland exercised a large degree of latitude in the enactment of discipline. As the *Code* made expressly clear, while ‘every scandal implie[d] offence ... every offence [was] not necessarily scandalous’.²⁷ Sessions were advised to weigh up the pros and cons of proceeding in cases of scandal. The main purpose of discipline was to reclaim and reform the sinner.²⁸ The session, therefore, had to be cautious in how they proceeded and make every effort to bring erring members back into the community.²⁹ This even-handedness likewise extended to their preferred method of punishment, which was directed to be appropriate to the offence itself. As section seven on ‘Sentences’ made clear, guilty persons were to be ‘admonished, rebuked, or cut off from church privileges’ in line with the ‘nature and magnitude’ of their offence.³⁰ In practice, this meant that some offences were handled with private rebukes before the Session, while others which were ‘flagrant’ were resolved with a public confession of sorrow before the congregation.

It is important, however, to bear some caveats in mind when using these sources. On the one hand, the survival of Presbyterian minute books is patchy and uneven. Less than twenty kirk session minute books survive for the period before 1800. While it is possible that records have been lost over time, it should be noted that not all courts consistently kept records — a fact that may even indicate laxity in practice.³¹ Moreover, the level of detail recorded differs across individual congregations, making it difficult to generalise about the circumstances of specific cases.

ministerial duties, published by the authority of the General Synod of Ulster (Belfast, 1825) (hereafter cited as *Code*).

²² *Ibid.*, pp 62–83, 67.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp 67–8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁸ Holmes, *Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian*, p. 169.

²⁹ *Code*, p. 64.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³¹ J. M. Barkley, ‘History of the ruling eldership in Irish Presbyterianism. Volume 1’ (M.A. thesis, Q.U.B., 1952), p. 34; Holmes, *Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian*, pp 168, 172–4.

Those that were complicated or required the calling of witnesses tend to be much richer in detail, including places, names and the circumstances leading to an offence. More often, cases simply note the name of the person who appeared, the offence they are charged with and the sentence passed. On the other hand, it should be recognised that Presbyterian belief and practice was not monolithic in character — a fact that impacted on how individual communities engaged with church discipline. There were at least six different splinter groups of Presbyterians active across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Andrew Holmes has pointed out, although each of these groups defined themselves as 'Presbyterian', they each embodied different understandings of their faith that reflected their distinctive social, ethnic and historical backgrounds.³² While not unimportant, this article reads the 'Presbyterian archive' in its broadest sense to gain an overall impression of the customs and traditions of the community.³³

Presbyterianism's position as a minority religious community and its concentration in the province of Ulster is one of the reasons why Irish historians have been hesitant to draw on their records. Until recently, Presbyterians have been positioned as the 'other' in Irish scholarship. This is most noticeable in studies of sexuality, where Presbyterian sexual culture has been represented as starkly different from the rest of Ireland. Presbyterians occupy a curious place in the history of Irish sexuality because they are regarded as being especially, if not excessively, concerned with sex. The 'Presbyterian paradox', according to Andrew Blaikie and Paul Gray, is that the community are regarded as having a strict attitude towards sexual discipline, while also exhibiting a 'freer' attitude towards sexual morality.³⁴ It is true that discipline cases of a sexual nature made up the bulk of the business of the Presbyterian church courts. Across a sample of eleven kirk session minute books, sexual offences accounted for approximately 44 per cent of all cases.³⁵ These included adultery, pre-marital fornication, fornication and 'scandalous carriage' — a catch-all term for non-penetrative activities such as kissing, groping and petting, as well as suspicious and unseemly conduct.

The Presbyterian 'fetish' for regulating the intimate lives of their adherents stands in sharp contrast to the seemingly 'promiscuous' behaviour of the community itself. Demographic evidence for the province of Ulster, an area of dense Presbyterian settlement, marked it out as different from the rest of Ireland. Studies of illegitimacy by S. J. Connolly and Paul Gray demonstrated evidence of considerable regional variation, with the north-eastern counties of the island returning consistently higher levels than elsewhere across the island.³⁶ Parish registers for eighteenth-century Ulster likewise revealed a high number of brides were

³² Holmes, *Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian*, p. 30.

³³ The minutiae of the differences in doctrinal belief among the various strands of Presbyterianism is not the focus of this article. On this subject, see Andrew R. Holmes, 'Community and discipline in Ulster Presbyterianism, 1770–1840' in Kate Copper and Jeremy Gregory (eds), *Retribution, repentance and reconciliation* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp 266–77; Blaikie & Gray, 'Archives of abuse', pp 61–84.

³⁴ Blaikie & Gray, 'Archives of abuse', p. 83.

³⁵ Leanne Calvert, "'He came to her bed pretending courtship": courtship, sex and the making of marriage in Ulster, 1750–1844' in *I.H.S.*, xlii, no. 162 (Nov. 2018), p. 258.

³⁶ William Paul Gray, 'A social history of illegitimacy in Ireland from the late eighteenth to early twentieth century (Ph.D. thesis, Q.U.B., 2000), pp 98, 148; S. J. Connolly, 'Illegitimacy and pre-nuptial pregnancy in Ireland before 1864: the evidence of some Catholic parish registers' in *I.E.S.H.*, xi (1979), pp 5–23.

pregnant on their wedding day, providing further evidence for the stereotype of looser Presbyterian morals.³⁷ Presbyterians have subsequently garnered a reputation as a permissive, if not sexually promiscuous, religious community with an unparalleled toleration for pre-marital sexual intercourse by Irish standards. This cultural trope sits at odds with that of its 'chaste and pure' Irish Catholic counterpart, which is said to have operated under a much stricter system of sexual morality. Some historians have even suggested that the Presbyterian system of sexual discipline itself may explain Ireland's different religious-sexual cultures. Blaikie and Gray, for example, speculatively proposed that the public nature of Presbyterian discipline purged the stigma of sexual sin — a process that was not replicated by Catholic confession, which forgave the sin in private but left the stigma intact.³⁸

These views have been significantly challenged and revised by recent scholarship. In their ground-breaking study of Irish marriage, Maria Luddy and Mary O'Dowd broke the link between Presbyterianism and sexual liberalism. Drawing comparisons across Ireland's main religious traditions, they highlighted similarities in sexual behaviour over difference. Like the Presbyterian church courts, fornication was also the offence that was most commonly dealt with by the Anglican establishment. Fragments from the Killaloe diocesan court, for example, show that there were thirty-eight petitions relating to fornication or pre-marital intercourse between 1686 and 1711.³⁹ Presbyterians were also not the only religious community in Ireland to engage in premarital sexual activity. Surviving records from all the main denominations in Ireland suggest that premarital sex was not uncommon across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moreover, relatively high rates of infanticide recorded across eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland indicate that extra-marital sexual activity was taking place.⁴⁰ On that basis, Luddy and O'Dowd refined the Irish evidence on bridal pregnancy, suggesting instead that a conservative figure of 10 per cent was more accurate.⁴¹

Scholarship by Luddy, O'Dowd and myself has also taken to task the image of Presbyterianism as sexually liberal, arguing instead that the boundaries between licit and illicit behaviour were far more flexible than has been assumed.⁴² Many Presbyterians who engaged in sexual intercourse did so with the intention of marriage and would not have regarded their behaviour as illicit. Moreover, in line with other religious traditions, the Presbyterian church courts emphasised that sexual intercourse belonged to marriage. Women who appeared on charges of fornication usually referred to the exchange of promises of marriage before intercourse, suggesting that the church courts explicitly asked such questions. For example, whereas Elizabeth Nesbit testified that George Taylor had 'seduced' her with promises of marriage before they had sexual intercourse, Mary Graham alleged that Robert Harris had repeated words of marriage to her before they had 'criminal correspondence'.⁴³ The church courts even suggested marriage as a solution in some

³⁷ Gray, 'Social history of illegitimacy', p. 296.

³⁸ Blaikie & Gray, 'Archives of abuse', p. 70.

³⁹ Luddy & O'Dowd, *Marriage in Ireland*, p. 148.

⁴⁰ Farrell, 'A most diabolical deed'; James Kelly, 'Infanticide in eighteenth-century Ireland' in *I.E.S.H.*, xix (1992), pp 5–26; Luddy & O'Dowd, *Marriage in Ireland*, p. 151.

⁴¹ Luddy & O'Dowd, *Marriage in Ireland*, p. 149.

⁴² Luddy & O'Dowd, *Marriage in Ireland*, pp 146–7; Calvert, "“He came to her bed””.

⁴³ Minutes of the presbytery of Monaghan, 7 May 1811 (P.H.S.I.); Cahans kirk session minutes, 9 Jan. 1784 (P.R.O.N.I., CR3/25/B/2); *ibid.*, 18 Apr. 1784.

cases. Whereas the session of Cahans told John Campbel in 1753 that he should 'go & marry the girl who had the bastards to him', they withheld church privileges from William Boyd Junior in June 1799 until his 'temper' had settled following his refusal to marry Mary Scott, with whom he was guilty of fornication.⁴⁴ As Luddy and O'Dowd have argued, premarital sexual intercourse was most problematic if the woman became pregnant and the man either refused to recognise the child or agreed to marriage. Pregnant brides were less of a problem than unmarried mothers.⁴⁵ Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the tropes of the 'chaste and pure' (Catholic) Irish and the 'promiscuous Ulster Presbyterian' exist more firmly in the cultural imagination than in historical reality.⁴⁶

II

The authors of the 'Agenda' pinpointed the Presbyterian archive as a source that could reveal much about women's intimate lives, from their own perspective. As the 'Agenda' highlighted, the records of the Presbyterian church courts could be mined from a 'woman's point of view'.⁴⁷ While the church courts were staffed entirely by male members of the community, this did not mean that discipline worked against the interest of women.⁴⁸ The church courts operated in an 'egalitarian' fashion, holding both women and men to account for their misbehaviour.⁴⁹ Women appear in the Presbyterian archive as defendants, accusers and witnesses, playing an active role in the business of the church courts. Their voices are, therefore, captured in the pages of the record books, albeit mediated through the pen of the male clerk who kept the minutes. Read against the grain, we can use the Presbyterian archive to access how women articulated their own sexual experiences and negotiated their place in their families and communities.

Presbyterian women were not passive participants in the church court system. As the work of Mary O'Dowd and Frances Norman has observed, the kirk session gave women a 'public venue' to voice their complaints.⁵⁰ Presbyterian women used the kirk session as a pressure tool to ensure that men acknowledged paternity and contributed to the financial upkeep of their illegitimate children. In the absence of

⁴⁴ Cahans kirk session minutes, 29 July 1753 (P.R.O.N.I., CR3/25/B/2); *ibid.*, 11 Aug. 1754; *ibid.*, 1 Dec. 1754; *ibid.*, 17 Jan. 1756; Leanne Calvert (ed.), 'Carmmoney kirk session minute book, January 1786–March 1804 (unpublished transcript of original in P.H.S.I.)', 4 Apr. 1799; *ibid.*, 2 May 1799; *ibid.*, 6 June 1799.

⁴⁵ Luddy & O'Dowd, *Marriage in Ireland*, pp 146–8.

⁴⁶ Calvert, "'He came to her bed'", p. 263.

⁴⁷ MacCurtain, Luddy & O'Dowd, 'Agenda', p. 19.

⁴⁸ Holmes, *Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian*, p. 224; Calvert, "'[T]o recover his reputation"; Blaikie & Gray, 'Archives of abuse', pp 71, 76; Rosalind Mitchison and Leah Leneman, *Sexuality and social control. Scotland, 1660–1780* (Oxford, 1989), pp 237–8; Margo Todd, *The culture of Protestantism in early modern Scotland* (New Haven, 2002), p. 178.

⁴⁹ Blaikie & Gray, 'Archives of abuse', pp. 71, 76; Holmes, *Shaping of Ulster*, p. 224; Mitchison & Leneman, *Sexuality and social control*, pp 237–8; Todd, *Culture of Protestantism*, p. 178.

⁵⁰ Mary O'Dowd, 'Women in Ulster, 1600–1800' in Kennedy & Ollerenshaw (eds), *Ulster since 1600*, p. 52; Frances Norman, "'She comitted that abominable act of uncleanness": locating female sexual agency in Presbyterian Ireland, c.1690–1750' in *Women's History Today*, iii, no. 3 (Spring 2022), pp 4–11.

medical evidence, women were asked to provide intimate, detailed accounts of when, where and how often they had sexual intercourse with the men they accused.⁵¹ For example, when Jean McCullan named Andrew McKeown as the father of her illegitimate child, she offered the kirk session a detailed account of their trysts. According to Jean, ‘ye act was committed on Bellyclare fair day, when Andrew McKeowns mother was abroad, his brother at ... work, and his father about the house’.⁵² Likewise, when Catharin McConnel appeared to prove that Robert Brison was the father of her child in May 1710, she told how the child was conceived before communion in the house of John Vance. Asked by the session ‘how she knew it to be Rob Bryson more than any other man’, Catharin answered that ‘she knew very wel[[]], for she saw him go from her bed in to his own bed’.⁵³

The space of the church court cut across both the gender and socio-economic boundaries that ordered Irish society, empowering lower ranking women to present suits against their social betters. An example of this may be found in the case of Martha McGregor, a servant girl, who testified before Cahans kirk session that Robert Nesbitt, her master and an elder of the church court, was the father of her child and that it had been conceived out of rape. In March 1755, Robert was cited to the kirk session because a report was circulating that he was guilty of ‘Uncleanness’ with Martha.⁵⁴ Robert confessed that he had committed ‘lewdness’ with Martha, and added that she ‘was not to blamed as he was’.⁵⁵ Martha was unable to appear the same day because she was ‘indisposed’ — a fact that the session attributed to her being pregnant.⁵⁶ In June, Martha stood before the kirk-session and provided an explicit account of how the child was conceived. She told how Robert had ‘come home very late partly intoxicate with liquor’ and requested she make him supper.⁵⁷ It was in the kitchen where he began his attack by laying ‘violent hands on her’, before ‘forcibly’ carrying her into the next room.⁵⁸ Despite making ‘all the resistance in her power by strength of body & force of argument’, Robert succeeded in the rape and ‘forcibly’ lay with her.⁵⁹ Martha’s testimony was supported by the midwife and other women who were present at her delivery, and the kirk session noted that she ‘always bore an exceeding sober, & chaste character’.⁶⁰ Taking into consideration Robert’s confession and the above, the kirk session decided that Martha was ‘NOT censurable’ and dismissed her accordingly.⁶¹ Robert was publicly rebuked and suspended from his office as elder.⁶²

⁵¹ See Leanne Calvert, ‘Who’s the daddy? Determining cases of disputed paternity in the eighteenth-century Presbyterian community’ in Salvador Ryan (ed.), *Birth and the Irish: a miscellany* (Dublin, 2021), pp 70–72.

⁵² Templepatrick kirk session minutes, 30 May 1704 (P.R.O.N.I., CR4/12/B/1).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16 May 1710.

⁵⁴ Cahans kirk session minutes, 18 Feb. 1755 (P.R.O.N.I., CR3/25/B/2); *ibid.*, 3 Mar. 1755.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3 Mar. 1755.

⁵⁶ A later entry confirms the birth and baptism of Martha, the illegitimate daughter of Robert Nesbit and Martha McGregor on 4 April 1755 and 9 June 1755 respectively.

⁵⁷ Cahans kirk session minutes, 22 June 1755 (P.R.O.N.I., CR3/25/B/2).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3 Mar. 1755.

In cases where reputed fathers denied guilt, it was up to women to prove they were telling the truth. Many women remained defiant and held steadfast in their accusations for considerable periods of time. For example, when Margaret Aston accused James Browne of being the father of her child in November 1717, she embarked on a five-year struggle to make him acknowledge paternity.⁶³ James 'absolutely' denied that 'ever he was Guilty' with Margaret, painting her as a liar.⁶⁴ Undeterred, Margaret continued to name him as the father, appearing before both the kirk session and James in February 1718 to affirm her allegation, adding that the pair had intercourse on 15 July 1717.⁶⁵ James eventually admitted guilt and was publicly rebuked for his part on 10 November 1722.⁶⁶ Likewise, it took eight years before Michael Paul finally admitted paternity of the child borne by Mary Main.⁶⁷

Women who continued to present their cases sometimes did so at risk of great personal cost. There is evidence, albeit scattered, that some women were threatened with violence by the men they accused. In Templepatrick, Grizell Mathison told the session that she had initially named Thomas McConnell as the father of her child because she feared that the actual father, Thomas Lauchlin, would 'beat her' if she identified him.⁶⁸ Other women ran the risk of doing further damage to their reputations. For example, when Elizabeth Morton named her married master, William Johnston, as the father of her illegitimate child, she opened herself up to multiple allegations of impropriety. William 'utterly' denied the allegation and claimed that Elizabeth had made it up to 'defraud him of some money'.⁶⁹ He also called multiple witnesses who cast doubt on Elizabeth's character by claiming that she had been found in 'naked bed' with numerous different men. Agnes Russell told how Elizabeth had once spent the night with a passing hair merchant, despite her warnings that his promises of marriage were 'pretend' and 'he was seeking an ill turn'.⁷⁰ Samuel Nivan, another witness, told how he found a man's hat and buttons in Elizabeth's room, and that she was known to absent her master's household at night.⁷¹ Agnes McKimm also related her suspicions that Elizabeth had a history of hiding premarital pregnancies by inducing miscarriage, telling the session how she had been caught with (presumably abortifacient) herbs that resembled parsley in her apron.⁷²

In addition to holding men to account for their misbehaviour, Presbyterian women also used the 'egalitarian' space of the church courts to negotiate with the kirk session the boundaries of their own sexual misbehaviour. Irish women and men participated in a vibrant sexual culture, wherein sexual behaviour was neither universally tied to marriage, nor did it always involve penetrative intercourse.

⁶³ Minutes of Templepatrick kirk session, 26 Nov. 1717 (P.R.O.N.I., CR4/12/B/1).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 10 Feb. 1718.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ James admitted guilt for the first time on 28 October 1722, almost five years after the case came to the kirk session: see minutes of Templepatrick kirk session, 28 Oct. 1722 (P.R.O.N.I., CR4/12/B/1); *ibid.*, 1 Nov. 1722; *ibid.*, 10 Nov. 1722.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 25 Jan. 1704; *ibid.*, 2 Feb. 1704; *ibid.*, 29 June 1712.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 26 Sept. 1704.

⁶⁹ Carnmoney kirk session minutes, Nov. 1710 (P.R.O.N.I., MIC1P/37/4/9).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

Luddy and O'Dowd's study of Irish marriage broadly confirmed what I demonstrated elsewhere for the Presbyterian community: not all sexual behaviours were strictly regarded as 'illicit'.⁷³ Physical contact that included petting, touching and kissing, and even bedsharing were accepted, if not sanctioned, ways for women and men to interact. The Presbyterian archive offers the opportunity to explore Irish women's experiences of these forms of sexual behaviour in detail, revealing a societal acceptance of what has been described by historians in Britain and Europe as a 'sliding scale' of sexual behaviours.⁷⁴ Where activities sat on the scale varied, but as a rule penetration acted as the tipping point. The case of Agnes Connolly and Joseph Young, which came before Cahans kirk session in February 1786, serves as a good example. The pair were cited to the church court after being spotted engaging in 'improper conduct' on a country road. For his part, Joseph admitted that he had only 'laid his hand on' Agnes and offered to take a 'voluntary oath that no member pertaining to his body was ever *in her*'.⁷⁵ Agnes confirmed this account, noting that while Joseph 'had his arm about her neck' and 'his hand upon her bare skin', he only touched her 'neck, hand or breast'.⁷⁶ Both parties emphasised the non-penetrative nature of their physical contact, demonstrating the sliding scale of immorality in action. While neither disputed the inappropriateness of their behaviour, they took pains to explain that they had not transgressed beyond acceptable boundaries.

Cases involving 'scandalous carriage' offer an interesting insight into the sliding scale in action. Bedsharing commonly came under this category and was regarded as 'offensive' because it carried sexual connotations. Courtship and other flirtatious behaviour often happened in and around the space of the bed, marking it as an activity that held the potential for sexual intercourse to take place.⁷⁷ That the community recognised bedsharing as a sexually disruptive activity is indicated in the minutes. Individuals who were seen lying in, leaning on or even sitting next to the bed of someone of the opposite sex to whom they were not married found themselves cited to the session to explain their 'unhandsome' or 'scandalous' carriage. For example, William McCrackin was rebuked privately before the session after he confessed to sitting on Margaret Gray's bedside and leaning on her bed 'when in suit of her for marriage', and Samuel Magill was 'earnestly dealt with' when it emerged he had 'leaned awhile' on Helen Miller's bed while she slept and 'laid his hand on her breast above the clothes'.⁷⁸

Women and men who appeared before the church courts on account of bedsharing demonstrated an awareness that it was potentially disruptive. For example, in June 1700, Jane Heron and Robert Currie were called before Cammonee session

⁷³ Calvert, "He came to her bed", pp 244–64.

⁷⁴ For work relating to England, France and Scotland, see the following respectively: William Gibson and Joanne Begiato, *Sex and the church in the long eighteenth-century* (London, 2017), pp 85–107; Julie Hardwick, 'Policing paternity: historicising masculinity and sexuality in early modern France' in *European Review of History*, xxii, no. 4 (2015), pp 643–57; Barclay, 'Marriage, sex', pp 163–79.

⁷⁵ Cahans kirk session minutes, 27 Feb. 1786 (P.R.O.N.I., CR3/25/B/2).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Luddy & O'Dowd, *Marriage in Ireland*, p. 146; Calvert. "He came to her bed", pp 253, 255–7.

⁷⁸ Cahans kirk session minutes, 1 Dec. 1754 (P.R.O.N.I., CR3/25/B/1); *ibid.*, 25 Jun. 1758; *ibid.*, 10 Aug. 1758.

on account of their 'very immodest carriage' in sharing a bed.⁷⁹ When the pair appeared the following month to answer the charges, they each admitted to bed-sharing but denied any further offence. Importantly, both parties acknowledged that their bedsharing looked suspicious — a fact owned by Jane when she admitted that their 'carriage gave offence' to the community.⁸⁰ However, they did not agree their actions warranted such scrutiny. When the pair were recalled by the session later that month, the minutes note that Jane was not 'fully convinc'd of ye heinousness of her sin', and Robert did not even appear.⁸¹ The couple may have recognised that bedsharing itself was offensive, but they did not agree their actions merited such a strong response.

Yet, it is important to note that cases of bedsharing that provoked charges of 'scandalous' and 'unseemly' carriage were not all treated equally.⁸² Presbyterian women and men negotiated the boundaries of their misbehaviour with the session and offered rationales that they thought mitigated the seriousness of their offence. For example, in December 1704, a case of bedsharing came to the attention of Templepatrick session when Thomas Baxter appeared and told how John Henry had approached him and told him 'yt he would let him see a man and a woman lie together'.⁸³ Thomas explained that he followed John to the house of Widow Cudbert, where he saw Margaret Cudbert (the widow's daughter) and John Burns in bed together.⁸⁴ Despite Widow Cudbert's protests that the couple had 'their cloaths on' and that both she and her daughter-in-law had acted as chaperones, Margaret was reproved for 'her unseemly carriage' and ordered to be publicly rebuked before the congregation.⁸⁵ Widow Cudbert's insistence that her chaperonage lessened the gravity of the offence can be read as the sliding scale of morality in operation. Chaperoned bedsharing, which was a courtship custom, was much less offensive.

Others maintained that bedsharing was innocent and took pains to convince the session of that fact. For example, in 1711 Eupham Thompson was called before Carnmoney session when her master, George Russell, reported that he found her and his sixteen-year-old servant, William McCracken, in bed together. While George admitted that he knew 'not what wickedness might have been committed by them', their 'indecent posture, lying naked in bed together and the woman's arm under William's head' was enough to rouse his suspicions.⁸⁶ Eupham disputed her master's reading of the situation. In her defence, she 'positively affirm[e]d' that 'no wickedness' had passed between her and William and maintained that they 'had no ill in mind but did it very innocently'.⁸⁷ Eupham's defence is important. On the one hand, her case demonstrates that the kirk session could be an egalitarian space that afforded women equal opportunities to speak out. On the other, it further underscores how the church courts were sites of negotiation, where believers could discuss with the session the boundaries of their misbehaviour. Her defence appears to have worked. Unable to 'fix any other guilt' upon the couple, they decided to

⁷⁹ Carnmoney kirk session minutes, 1 June 1700 (P.R.O.N.I., MIC1P/37/4/9).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3 July 1700.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, July 1700.

⁸² Leneman & Mitchison, *Sexuality and social control*, pp 178–9.

⁸³ Templepatrick kirk session minutes, 27 Dec. 1704 (P.R.O.N.I., CR4/12/B/1).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Carnmoney kirk session minutes, 12 July 1711 (P.R.O.N.I., MIC1P/37/4/9).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

rebuke Eupham privately for ‘lying down in bed with a man’ — an action that put her ‘in the way of temptation’.⁸⁸

III

The Presbyterian archive not only tells us about women’s intimate lives — it also reveals much about the gendered discourses that shaped the lives of men. It is important to remember that the Presbyterian church courts were gendered spaces that were made up entirely of men. The minister, along with an elected body of male elders, were empowered to oversee the behaviour of the whole community. Yet, as the previous section revealed, this did not mean that church discipline worked in the favour of men. Indeed, as my recent research on men’s sexual misbehaviour argued, the Presbyterian archive presents Irish historians with the opportunity to challenge historical narratives that equate ‘maleness and power’.⁸⁹ It is important to remember that men also have gender, and that expectations placed on Irish men were likewise shaped by gendered constructs. The Presbyterian archive can, therefore, be mined from a gendered point of view, allowing us to explore how religion shaped the lives of Irish men. What roles, responsibilities and expectations were placed on Presbyterian men? How were these social codes enforced, and what happened to those men who deviated from them?

The Presbyterian archive brings into sharper focus the importance of marriage to men’s identities in Ireland. Men who failed to uphold their responsibilities as good husbands found themselves before the church courts. Cases were usually instigated by unhappy wives, who used the space of the church court to hold their husbands to account for bad behaviour. Maria Luddy and I have both demonstrated how some Presbyterian women complained to the kirk session that their husbands had failed to provide for them and their families.⁹⁰ For example, when Jenat Colheart was cited before Carrmoney session because they heard she had been living apart from her husband, she stated she would only live with him if he would ‘make ... provision for his family’.⁹¹ According to Jenat, Alexander refused to ‘labour to get them bread’, making it impossible for her to ‘have a life w[i]th him’.⁹² Other women turned to the church courts and asked for their help when faced with abusive husbands. In 1703, the presbytery of Route awarded Margaret Kerr a testimonial of her good behaviour that would enable her to become a member of any Christian congregation. Margaret’s husband, James Boyd, was an unrepentant adulterer who not only beat her ‘grievously’ but refused to allow his wife and children to attend religious services.⁹³ Yet, the church courts did not always act in ways that solved problems. When Lettuce Wilson complained in

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 17 Oct. 1711.

⁸⁹ Calvert, “[T]o recover his reputation”; Rebecca Anne Barr, Sean Brady and Jane McGaughey, ‘Ireland and masculinities in history: an introduction’ in *idem* (eds), *Ireland and masculinities in history* (Basingstoke, 2019), p. 5.

⁹⁰ Luddy, ‘Marriage, Sexuality’, pp 349–50; Leanne Calvert, “‘Her husband went away some time agoe’: marriage breakdown in Presbyterian Ulster, c.1690–1830’ in *Women’s History*, xv, no. 2 (summer 2020), p. 9.

⁹¹ Carrmoney kirk session minutes, 3 Aug. 1698 (P.R.O.N.I., MIC1P/37/4/9).

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Minutes of Route presbytery, 30 Dec. 1701 (P.H.S.I.); *ibid.*, 3 Feb. 1702; *ibid.*, 5 Apr. 1703.

1697 that she had 'no peace in her family because of her husband's hard usage', Carmoney session responded by citing her and her husband to attend the next meeting in order that their 'differences [be] remov'd'.⁹⁴ Neither party appeared again.⁹⁵

Husbands were also cited by the Presbyterian church courts for behaving insensitively towards their wives and provoking them to jealousy. For example, when a report was spread in June 1706 that James Walker (a married man) had been behaving inappropriately with a woman named Mary Wilson, it emerged that it was his wife, Elizabeth Marchland, who first circulated it.⁹⁶ James and Mary had allegedly been alone together quite frequently, they had held hands during sermon and James had even gifted Mary with a coat.⁹⁷ Jean Templeton was called, who told the session that Elizabeth had confided about her husband's bad conduct, including how he behaved like a 'plague' in the house.⁹⁸ The session agreed that James was at fault and resolved that he should be 'rebuked for giving grounds of jealousy to his wife'.⁹⁹ The following February, the session again took the opportunity to provide marital advice. Whereas James was instructed by the elders 'to love and be tender towards his wife and [to] perform ye duties of a loving and faithful husband', Mary Wilson was instructed to 'behave inoffensively and not admit of any conversation' that would give Elizabeth 'any ground of jealousy or suspicion'. Elizabeth was likewise advised to be 'tender of her husband's reputation' in the future. The session ended their counselling-session by requiring James and Elizabeth to 'evidence their p[er]fect friendship and reconciliation' and for Elizabeth and Mary to do the same.¹⁰⁰ While Elizabeth initially attempted to stop proceedings by claiming she had made the report 'out of mistake', it is likely that she used the power of gossip and rumour to bring her husband's bad behaviour to the attention of the church courts.¹⁰¹ Women weaponised the courts, acknowledging them as spaces where they could challenge their husband's authority and secure his reprimand. Men were censured for failing as husbands.

The Presbyterian archive likewise affords interesting snapshots into how the dynamics of sexual relationships between men and women were shaped by gendered discourses. Similar to accounts of sexual assault and rape, testimonies concerning illicit, yet consensual, sexual relationships shifted responsibility onto men. In my study of Presbyterian courtship, for example, I highlighted how sexual aggression in the form of play-fighting, grabbing and restraint punctuated the testimonies of women.¹⁰² Whereas women were depicted as victims of sexually aggressive men, men were positioned as lacking in restraint and in need of control — a trend that was reflected in Britain.¹⁰³ This can be seen in a case of alleged adultery between Margaret Macre and John Wales, which came repeatedly before the session of Cahans between November 1755 and October 1757. Whereas Margaret admitted the offence, John persistently denied guilt and the case remained

⁹⁴ Carmoney kirk session, 14 July 1697 (P.R.O.N.I., MIC1P/37/4/9).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21 July 1697.

⁹⁶ Aghadowey kirk session minutes, 11 June 1706 (P.H.S.I.); Calvert, "'I am friends wt you & do entertain no malice'", pp 185–209.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 June 1706; *ibid.*, 4 Feb. 1707.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11 June 1706.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 4 Feb. 1707.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 11 June 1706.

¹⁰² Calvert, "'He came to her bed'", pp 254–6.

¹⁰³ Tim Hitchcock, *English sexualities, 1700–1800* (Basingstoke, 1997), p. 100.

unresolved.¹⁰⁴ Margaret's confession, however, reflects contemporary ideas about male sexual prowess and the perceived inability of women to fend off such advances. According to Margaret, John 'seduce[d]' her with 'long protestations of his love' and had even 'proposed selling his farm' so that the pair could move to America.¹⁰⁵ Their first sexual encounter occurred after John asked Margaret to 'tie up' his bleeding arm.¹⁰⁶ In her testimony, Margaret told how John 'tossed her down & was guilty with her' and 'that she made resistance tho' not as much as she ought to have done'.¹⁰⁷ A similar narrative of failed resistance marked their third sexual encounter, which happened when John came to her house to 'borrow a book very early & seized her in her own bed & was guilty with her'.¹⁰⁸

Fatherhood was also a core element of men's identities in Ireland and the Presbyterian church courts kept a close eye on men's sexual behaviour as a result. While the interrogation of women before the church courts about the paternity of children is often read as the disciplining of female sexuality, it reveals much about the importance of fatherhood. Kirk sessions worked hard to identify the fathers of illegitimate children not just for moral reasons: they did so for financial purposes too. Ireland did not have a statutory system of poor relief in practice until 1838. Until this date, the responsibility of providing for the financial maintenance of unaffiliated illegitimate children and unmarried mothers fell on neighbours, friends and local communities.¹⁰⁹ Kirk sessions, therefore, tried to ensure that the fathers of illegitimate children were identified and charged for maintenance, removing the burden of supporting women and children from the local community. For example, when Elizabeth McGlweyan named Samuel Kinning as the father of her child, the session made the latter 'promise to maintain his child [so] yt it shall not be a burden to the paroch'.¹¹⁰ The church courts even supported the maintenance claims of female members against men of other faiths. When Mary Gibson was censured in Carnmoney in February 1708 for fornication with Roger Magill, an 'Irish Papist', the session noted that although they could 'do nothing with him', they would 'see to have him apprehended ... that he may give security for the maintenance of the child'.¹¹¹

Baptism was used as a tool to enforce and regulate men's fatherly responsibilities. As was the case with other religious traditions in Ireland, the Presbyterian ceremony of baptism was a social event that brought families and communities together.¹¹² Fathers were allotted a special place in these rituals and were usually tasked with presenting their children for baptism — a role that was colloquially

¹⁰⁴ Cahans kirk session minutes, 16 Oct. 1757 (P.R.O.N.I., CR3/25/B/1).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 Apr. 1756.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ The Poor Law system encouraged unmarried mothers to seek refuge and support inside the workhouse system. In 1864, the Board of Guardians were empowered to sue putative fathers for the maintenance of illegitimate children. Mothers could not seek this independently: see, Farrell, 'A most diabolical deed', p. 28; Virginia Crossman, *The Poor Law in Ireland, 1838–1948* (Dublin, 2006), p. 4.

¹¹⁰ Templepatrick kirk session minutes, Nov. 1702 (P.R.O.N.I., CR4/12/B/1).

¹¹¹ Carnmoney kirk session minutes, 10 Feb. 1708 (P.R.O.N.I., MIC1P/37/4/9).

¹¹² Clodagh Tait, 'Spiritual bonds, social bonds: baptism and godparenthood in Ireland, 1530–1690' in *Cultural and Social History*, ii, no. 3 (2005), pp 301–27.

known in some communities as 'fathers privileges'.¹¹³ Those who fathered children outside of marriage were pressured to publicly acknowledge their fatherly responsibilities by participating in these rituals. For example, when John Wilson, a married man, appeared before Carnmoney session in 1710 and asked that the mother of his illegitimate child be allowed to hold their child up for baptism instead, his request was denied. The session dismissed his appeal on the grounds that it was not 'practicable for the mother to hold up the child, the Father being in health' and she being 'equally guilty of the same sin'.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, the baptism itself could not go ahead until John appeared 'at last once in publick' for adultery.¹¹⁵ The session wanted to make sure that John took public responsibility for his illegitimate child *and* his sexual misconduct.

Father's privileges were a double-edged sword. As much as the church courts wanted men to admit paternal responsibility, they were also concerned to ensure that men were capable of fulfilling their fatherly duties. Those who failed to fulfil the expectations of fatherhood could be denied father's privileges, making their shortcomings public to their neighbours and friends. An example may be found in the case of Thomas Hamilton, which was presented to Carnmoney kirk session in June 1703. Thomas came to the notice of the session when it emerged he had not only deserted his wife, Mary Cunningham, he had since cohabited with and conceived a child with his mistress, Agnes Hamilton.¹¹⁶ When Thomas applied to have the child baptised, the session took the opportunity to inquire about his ability to provide financial support. When it appeared that there was 'no great probability that [Thomas] would make conscience of discharging that duty' and 'being poor a contemptible soldier ... [with] no place of constant abode', the session denied him the privilege of holding the child up for baptism.¹¹⁷ Instead, Agnes was permitted to perform this role — a decision that publicly highlighted Thomas's failure as a father and a husband.¹¹⁸

IV

Until very recently, the records of the Presbyterian church courts have been largely neglected by Irish historians on account of the assumed differences of the Ulster Presbyterian community from the wider Irish population. Marked out as numerically, geographically and culturally 'other', studies of Presbyterian family life were unfairly pushed to the margins of Irish scholarship. As this article outlines, the field has rapidly and recently changed. Scholars have begun to appreciate the value of the Presbyterian archive for accessing the intimate worlds of Irish women and men. Rich in detail, the minute books of the Presbyterian church courts capture tantalising snapshots of everyday family life that are otherwise lost to historians, extending the conclusions of studies that focus on the Anglican elite. While Presbyterians may have been a religious minority in Ireland, their records offer

¹¹³ Ballykelly kirk session minutes, 8 May 1808 (P.H.S.I.).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Carnmoney kirk session minutes, 12 Apr. 1703 (P.R.O.N.I., MIC1P/37/4/9); *ibid.*, 30 May 1703; *ibid.*, 8 June 1703; *ibid.*, 23 June 1703; *ibid.*, 30 June 1703; *ibid.*, 10 Aug. 1703; *ibid.*, 24 Aug. 1703; *ibid.*, 4 Sept. 1704; *ibid.*, 21 Sept. 1703.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 Sept. 1703.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

more than a marginalised and unrepresentative picture of Irish life. Instead, they cast fresh light on the wider Irish evidence, shattering rigid and archaic religious-cultural stereotypes in the process.

Considered from a ‘woman’s point of view’, the Presbyterian archive contains a wealth of information on the everyday intimacies of Irish women’s lives. It is well established that accessing how women (and men) in the past thought about, experienced and understood their sexual lives is problematic. By its very nature, sex is hidden from public view and most sources that detail the intimacies of everyday life focus on the disorderly and the deviant. Delineating the experiences of the ‘ordinary’ and the everyday from the ‘deviant’ perspectives of the archives in which they were recorded poses a challenge to historians. This is why the Presbyterian archive is such an important source. While the cases that came before the church courts did so because they were perceived in some way ‘deviant’, they can be read against the grain to reveal much about the ‘ordinary’ details of family life. As Julie Hardwick demonstrated in her interrogation of the ‘archive of reproduction’ in long eighteenth-century France, such records illuminate the backstories of relationships through the words of couples, their friends, families and neighbours.¹¹⁹ The Presbyterian archive does the same — it elucidates the hidden aspects of Irish family life, lifting the curtain on the sexual relationships, conflicts and tensions that shaped daily life. As this article has revealed, women used the space of the church courts to hold men to account for their bad behaviour and to publicly pressure men into admitting paternity. They also negotiated with the church courts over the boundaries of sexual sin, revealing the colourful spectrum of sexual behaviour that existed along the ‘chaste’ and ‘promiscuous’ spectrum.

The Presbyterian archive also presents Irish historians with a unique access point through which to unpack the gendered discourses that shaped Irish society. As the authors of the ‘Agenda’ pointed out, ‘Few men or women live isolated from each other’ and recovering women from the historical record is ‘only half the battle’.¹²⁰ As this article has outlined, men appear in the Presbyterian archive as gendered subjects. As potential husbands and fathers, men’s sexual and family lives were placed under scrutiny by the church and the communities to which they belonged. Men were censured for failing to fulfil their familial duties or for acting in ways that threatened the cohesiveness of society. As my recent research on the sexual double standard has revealed, sexual reputation was an important facet of Irish masculinity more broadly.¹²¹ Bad husbands and bad fathers were just as problematic as unwed mothers. The Presbyterian archive, therefore, presents historians with an opportunity to not only write the history of Irish women but to rewrite the history of men.

¹¹⁹ Julie Hardwick, *Sex in an old regime: young workers and intimacy in France, 1660–1789* (Oxford, 2020), pp 7–10.

¹²⁰ MacCurtain, Luddy & O’Dowd, ‘Agenda’, p. 37.

¹²¹ Calvert, “[T]o recover his reputation”.