

Stepfamilies in Europe, 1400–1800

Edited by LYNDAN WARNER



STEPFAMILIES IN EUROPE, 1400–1800

Stepfamilies were as common in the European past as they are today. *Stepfamilies in Europe, 1400–1800* is the first in-depth study to chart four centuries of continuity and change for these complex families created by the death of a parent and the remarriage of the survivor. With geographic coverage from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia and from the Atlantic coast to Central Europe, this collection of essays from leading scholars compares how religious affiliation, laws and cultural attitudes shaped stepfamily realities.

Exploring stepfamilies across society from artisans to princely rulers, this book considers the impact of remarriage on the bonds between parents and their children, step-parents and stepchildren, while offering insights into the relationships between full siblings, half siblings and stepsiblings.

The contributors investigate a variety of primary sources, from songs to letters and memoirs, printed Protestant funeral works, Catholic dispensation requests, kinship puzzles, legitimation petitions, and documents drawn up by notaries, to understand the experiences and life cycle of a family and its members – whether growing up as a stepchild or forming a stepfamily through marital choice as an adult.

Featuring an array of visual evidence, and drawing on topics such as widowhood, remarriage and the guardianship of children, *Stepfamilies in Europe* will be essential reading for scholars and students of the history of the family.

Lyndan Warner is Associate Professor of History at Saint Mary's University, Canada. Her previous publications include *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* with Sandra Cavallo (1999) and *The Ideas of Man and Woman in Renaissance France: Print, Rhetoric, and Law* (2011).



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NOTES ON THE TEXT

Many contributors to this collection do not regularly publish in English, so one of the aims was to provide broad coverage of new scholarship on Europe to an English-reading public. This comparative European historiography of the stepfamily is supplemented by an Appendix of Visual Sources of the Stepfamily in chapter 12, a list of Suggestions for Further Reading in chapter 14, as well as a few primary sources available in English or translation.

In each chapter, we have included the full page range at the first citation as well as the specific page numbers referred to in the body text. For example: Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, 'Introduction', in Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, eds., *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 1999): 3–23, 4. For publishers, where the city is part of the name of the press, we omitted the location, hence, Oxford University Press or Presses universitaires de Rennes.

Paying attention to the importance of language, we placed the translated terms or phrases following the original in italics and within brackets. For example: "in the Grimm brothers' fairy tale *The Juniper Tree*, the stepmother jealous of the first-born stepson beckons 'my son' (*myn Sön*) with an offer of an apple, and he innocently answers his 'Mother' (*Moeder*)".

Family tree diagrams

Across the collection the family trees have been adapted to a standard format so that, whenever possible, the sequence of marriages and births of children from each bed can be read from left to right, as the family evolved through the years. Different types of relationships are also indicated and the marriages are numbered, if known.

Note on the Cover Illustration

Cover illustration: Mazo, Juan Bautista Martinez del (1612–67)/Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria/Bridgeman Images.

In *The Painter's Family*, c.1665, Juan Bautista Martinez del Mazo, the court painter to Philip IV of Spain, portrays the children of two of his three marriages and places the significant age gap between the half-siblings on display. In this detail, the eldest living daughter from Mazo's first marriage wears a rich, red skirt and is accompanied by her younger half-brothers from her father's second marriage as well as her own child, Mazo's granddaughter in blue and white. The family portrait also pays homage to Diego Velázquez, who was Mazo's mentor as a painter, his father-in-law by Mazo's first wife, and the grandfather to the mature children shown in the full portrait.

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research project, in collaboration with Dana Wessell Lightfoot, deals with Jewish women and *conversas* in Girona in the aftermath of anti-Jewish violence in 1391 and is funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight grant.

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perspective. She is currently researching legal ideas about the womb funded by a Canadian SSHRC grant.

Tim Stretton teaches at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Canada. After studying law and history at the University of Adelaide, he obtained his PhD from the University of Cambridge. A Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, his publications include *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* with Cambridge University Press, an edited volume of legal documents entitled *Marital Litigation in the Court of Requests 1542–1642*, and more recently a collection of essays, *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World*, co-edited with Krista Kesselring. He serves on the Board of Advisors for the *Journal of British Studies*.

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Lyndan Warner held posts at the University of Exeter and the University of Warwick in the UK after her doctorate at the University of Cambridge, moving on to the University of Waikato in New Zealand before arriving at Saint Mary's University on the Atlantic coast of Canada, where she is Associate Professor of History. Warner's historiographical review 'Stepfamilies in Early Modern Europe: Paths of Historical Inquiry' was published in *History Compass* in 2016. Her illustrated article 'Remembering the Mother, Presenting the Stepmother: Portraits of the Early Modern Family in Northern Europe' was chosen by the editorial board of *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* as 'best article' for 2011. She is the author of *The Ideas of Man and Woman in Renaissance France: Print, Rhetoric, and Law* and co-editor of *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Stepfamilies in the European past

Lyndan Warner

In the late 1400s, a book with more printings than the Bible told a story, already familiar since the medieval era, about a woman who had three husbands over her lifetime.¹ After many barren years with her first husband, the couple finally had a precious daughter whom they loved and raised to be virtuous. When this husband died, the widow remarried and had another daughter, a half-sister for her older child. When her second husband died, the widow remarried again and gave birth to a third daughter, another half-sister for her two older siblings. Through her serial marriages, the woman had three daughters from three husbands. This ‘Legend of the Nativity of Our Lady’, one of the stories in a collection of the lives of the saints, told the tale of Saint Anne, whose long-awaited first child, Mary, became the mother of Jesus, making this thrice-married widow his grandmother.

According to the *Golden Legend*, Mary, the most holy woman in Christianity, had two stepfathers and two half-sisters.² Other writers developed and embellished the tale, and from the 1300s to the early 1600s artists portrayed this blended holy family in thousands of manuscript illuminations, triptychs, paintings, sculptures, woodcut prints, stained glass windows and altarpieces across Germany, the Low Countries, France and as far south as Italy. Often referred to as the *Holy Kinship* or *Holy Kindred*, these ubiquitous images cosily depicted three half-sisters, their father or stepfathers – all of Anne’s three husbands, whether dead or living – a remarried mother, her three sons-in-law, and her grandchildren, Jesus and his six first-cousins. For one example, see an early Italian version of the Holy Kinship theme in Figure 1.1. Few modern observers realize they are looking at what might more appropriately be called the *Holy Stepfamily*.³ It is easy to assume that blended families with step-parents and half-siblings are a modern phenomenon resulting from divorce, but stepfamilies have a long history because mothers and fathers died at much younger ages in the 1400s to 1700s, and surviving parents often remarried to replace their loss.

Stepfamilies in Europe, 1400 to 1800 addresses a significant gap in the history of the family. Since the 1960s, historical demographers have studied family structures



FIGURE 1.1 Lorenzo Fasolo, *The Family of the Virgin*, Savona, Italy, 1513. 202 cm × 144 cm, Paris: Musée du Louvre INV.352.

Photo: Philippe Fuzeau. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

and household size, but stepfamily and blended-family life in the European past still remain uncharted territory. As women's history emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, the widow, with her visibility as a head of household in legal documents and her potential for independent action, benefited from numerous studies of the

conditions of widowhood in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. In the 1980s and beyond, social historians and historical demographers studied remarriage rates and patterns to discover a steady trend across early modern Europe of more frequent, and more rapid, remarriages by widowers, especially those with children.⁴ However, as early critics noted, these studies have not followed through to understand the consequences of a remarriage on the formation of a newly created stepfamily.⁵ From the 1990s gender historians began to investigate the male and female experiences of widowhood and remarriage,⁶ and so some of the structural background to the creation of stepfamilies and blended families has been established, but this is the first book to study stepfamilies in the European past.

This collection features the emerging research on stepfamilies in early modern Europe, and so it strives to achieve a balance of geographic, social and religious coverage; from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia and from England to Central Europe, from labourers to rulers and across Catholic, Protestant and Jewish stepfamily experiences.⁷ This cross-cultural approach aims to enlighten us about the formation of stepfamilies, the roles of step-parents and the living conditions for children, stepchildren, half-siblings and stepsiblings – their duties and obligations to each other as well as their emotional attachments or rivalries. The language and terminology of the stepfamily receives attention drawing on a range of sources – from the legal terms in contracts or laws or petitions to the terms of endearment in letters or the ways family members refer to each other in memoirs and funeral biographies or in moral conduct books and fairy tales – to fathom how Europeans perceived and expressed these stepfamily relationships in multiple languages across centuries. The early modern portrayals of blended families ranging from devotional sculpture and sumptuous paintings to popular prints and cheap engravings receive attention so that researchers might more often see real-life equivalents to the *Holy Stepfamily* of Anne, her husbands and daughters hiding in plain sight in visual sources. Within Europe a range of legal frameworks shaped the lives of stepfamilies, such as the rules of guardianship on whether children could accompany a widowed parent into a remarriage and how children born of first, second or subsequent unions might share an inheritance. The collection aims to understand both the constraints and the possibilities facing adults and children in a stepfamily and how stepfamilies worked within and around law and custom.

The long history of stepfamilies

It is important to briefly outline the dominant forms of stepfamilies today in order to understand how they differ because, in the present era, divorce and stepfathers have taken the place of death and stepmothers in the European past. Divorce was not possible in Catholic territories in the 1400s to 1700s, so stepfamilies were formed by the death of a parent and the subsequent remarriage of the survivor. Catholics could apply to annul a marriage for reasons such as impotence, or an unhappy Catholic couple could apply to separate (physically for reasons such as cruelty or adultery or just to separate their property). Neither partner could remarry (or they would be engaging in bigamy, another sin).⁸ After the Reformation in the 1500s,

Protestant cities such as Geneva, Basel, Zurich or Neuchâtel, states such as Scotland (but not England and Wales), Scandinavia, and parts of Germany permitted divorce allowing remarriage, but in practice these were difficult to obtain, numbering annually in the single digits in the cities.⁹ In the Jewish tradition divorce was possible, but became restrictive for northern European Jews in the late medieval to early modern period, where a woman's right to her *ketubbah* (marriage contract payment she would have received as a widow) was reduced if she initiated the divorce; but there is evidence of Jewish divorce in fifteenth-century Sicily and sixteenth-century Rome.¹⁰ Divorce in large numbers is a post-World War II phenomenon, rising from the 1960s as Western nations began to permit more liberal 'no fault' divorce laws.¹¹ Whereas today's stepchildren often have two parents living in separate households and one or both parents have new partners, the children in the stepfamilies of 1400–1800 were predominantly half-orphans who had lost one parent and gained another.

In the 2000s, across Europe the most common stepfamily type involves a single or divorced mother living with her children and introducing a stepfather (a live-in partner or husband) to the household.¹² In Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, Spain and Scotland in the early 2000s, children in a stepfamily lived most often with a mother and a stepfather – whether cohabiting or married – and a significant margin separates the next category of children living with their father and a stepmother. The most rare stepfamily type is also the most complex, when both partners bring children to the new union, so that each partner is both a parent and a step-parent.¹³

The proportions of children living in stepfamilies today are not shocking or high compared to the numbers of children who lived with a remarried parent and a step-parent in Europe and its colonies in the 1500s to 1700s.¹⁴ In the 2000s, the percentage of children living in all of the combined types of stepfamilies calculated by government statistics offices in Spain, the Netherlands, England and Wales, Sweden, Germany and France ranges from a low of 3.7 per cent to approximately 11 per cent.¹⁵ By comparison, in a study of the records of almost 10,000 children born of first marriages in New France in the 1600s, if the father was the surviving parent, then 53.3 per cent of children, while they still lived at home, experienced a stepmother. In New France in this era, 46.7 per cent of the children of widowed mothers became stepchildren to a stepfather.¹⁶ Living under lone parenthood followed by a stepfamily structure was a common occurrence in the early years of the growing French colony, experienced by roughly every second child. The numbers of stepfamilies were higher than back in Europe; if we compare Spanish census data from 1578 in Cuenca, 1558 in Salamanca and 1589 in Ciudad Real, then 8.75 per cent, 17 per cent and 20 per cent of the households had children from at least one previous marriage.¹⁷ Stepfamilies were part of everyday life in premodern Europe.

Some of the children in the stepfamilies of centuries past stemmed from relationships outside of marriage, such as an illegitimate child from a premarital or extramarital affair. One of the themes of the collection considers these half-siblings and the circumstances in which illegitimate children could be folded into one of the 'inclusive' families or 'virtual stepfamilies', rather than raised in a Catholic

institution, abandoned or never acknowledged.¹⁸ This book focuses on stepchildren and half-siblings from different marriage beds or born out of wedlock, and extends its scope to examine the fate of stepchildren who became full orphans when the surviving parent died; however, the in-depth study of foster children or adoptive children is a burgeoning field of its own, not within the scope of these essays.¹⁹

The language of stepfamilies: from terms of endearment to legal terminology

The term ‘stepfamily’ in the English language is relatively recent, dating back only to the late 1800s. The origin of the English prefix ‘step’ derives from Old English *ástēped* and Old German *stiuven* in the 900s to 1100s, meaning ‘bereaved’ or ‘to bereave’; thus, a child suffering the loss of a parent might be labeled a ‘stepchild’ or a ‘stepbairn’. In this sense the etymology of the ‘step’ terms we use today, in English, Dutch and German, derives from the half-orphan’s bereavement, but the ‘step’ prefix also points to the replacement for that loss if the surviving parent of the child remarried. ‘Step’ represents both loss and substitution; bereavement and replacement. A stepfather, for example, ‘might be rendered’ as ‘one who becomes a father . . . to an orphan’. The term stepson originally referred to ‘an orphan who becomes a son’ while a stepdaughter meant ‘an orphan who becomes a daughter’ through ‘the marriage of the surviving parent’. These ‘step’ terms encompass both the relationship with the missing parent and the new substitute parent.²⁰

Stepfamilies are known by many names and terms in European society today. In French, Italian or Spanish, the term ‘blended family’ translates literally as ‘recomposed family’ (Fr. *famille recomposée*) or ‘reconstituted family’ (It. *famiglia ricostituita*, Sp. *familia reconstituida*), phrases that signal the formation of a new family out of the remnants of a previous one. German speakers in Switzerland, Austria or Germany refer to ‘patchwork families’ (*Patchworkfamilien*),²¹ a term that signifies the assembly of fragments of existing families to create a new ‘stitched together’ family. A Danish self-help book recently proposed the term ‘bonus parent’ to convey the addition of an adult in the life of a child whose parent finds a new partner, while German sociologists have used the term ‘continued family’ to suggest the sequential or serial nature of a family’s shift from one form to another.²² ‘Stepfamily’ has become the term adopted by the census and statistics offices of many European as well as English-speaking nations such as the UK, USA, Canada and Australia when conducting government surveys about household composition, so it is the term used in the title and throughout the book as it examines the stepfamily in its many permutations, past and present.²³

In early modern Europe, as a carryover from ancient Rome, some classical Latin terms such as *noverca* for stepmother or *vitricus* for stepfather made their way into literary, legal and private sources.²⁴ Renaissance vernacular translations from Latin show vestiges of the classical terms, for example, in a sixteenth-century French adaptation of Juan Luis Vives’s *Instruction for the Christian Woman*. The French version warns the woman who would marry a widower father of the trap that

stepmothers (*nouerques (dictes belles meres)*) would be known as ‘unjust and unfair’ (*iniuste and inique*) or ‘bitter and malevolent stepmothers’ (*aspres and mauvaises nouerques*).²⁵ Often these Latin or latinized terms are confined to law books, for example, in the discussion of the rights of a sixteenth-century stepfather (Latin *vitricus* adapted in French as *vitric* or *vitrique*) to be the guardian of his wife’s son as discussed in the Parlement de Paris, the highest court of appeal in France.²⁶ A seventeenth-century Hungarian widower who married six times, as analyzed in Gabriella’s Erdélyi’s chapter, describes one of his wives in his diary as a ‘real stepmother’ (*ipsissima noverca*) to characterize her less than satisfactory relationship with his children.²⁷

In medieval Latin, the word for stepmother became *matrasta*, which spawned a variety of Romance language equivalents; *madrastra* in Catalan sometimes alternated with *matrastra* in early Spanish, *marâtre* in French and *matrigna* in Italian. By the thirteenth century in French, *marâtre* had already begun to have associations with cruelty or mistreatment, and in the sixteenth century the alternative *belle-mère* came to be used as a neutral term, as we saw in the French version of Vives above where *nouerque* has a more pejorative sense than the alternative *belle-mère*.²⁸ We can see this trend across Italian and Spanish in the sixteenth-century translations of Vives’s chapters of advice for ‘the twice-married and stepmothers’ as well as his chapter on ‘second marriages’. Translators used *matrigna* for the uncaring Italian stepmother or *madrastra* for the ill-tempered Spanish stepmother as Vives contrasts their conduct throughout with the truly good and virtuous woman who would be like a mother (*madre*).²⁹ A good stepmother shares the name ‘mother’ and, as Anna Bellavitis documents in chapter 4, this is precisely the understanding that resonates in the will of a Venetian jeweller addressing his son in the late 1500s to remind him that during the son’s illness, the father’s second wife ‘worried not as a stepmother (*maregna*) but as a mother (*madre*)’.³⁰ In seventeenth-century German language funeral books, too, as explored in chapter 8 by Cornelia Niekus Moore, a good stepmother meant a ‘true virtuous mother’ (*Eine treue rechtschaffene Mutter*).³¹

Variations on this theme recurred for other stepfamily relationships in the Romance languages. In medieval Latin, *patastru* or *patraster* for stepfather became *padastre* in Catalan, *padrastro* in Spanish, *patrigno* in Italian and *parastre* in France and parts of the southern Low Countries, although ‘parâtre’ in French could be used interchangeably with *beau-père*, which replaced it in the nineteenth century.³² While a vocabulary to designate stepchildren existed, such as *figliastri* in Italian or *filastres* in French, these terms were not necessarily in common currency.³³ In Venice in the sixteenth century, for example, Anna Bellavitis finds a stepdaughter described in a testament as a *fiastra*, whereas Guerson and Wessell Lightfoot in chapter 2 noticed that although the terms for stepsiblings in the 1400s existed in Catalan prescriptive literature, this use did not transfer to documents drawn up by notaries.³⁴

Among the northern and Germanic languages, as we have already discussed, variations on the prefix ‘step’ were added to the family terms so that in Sweden, for example, ‘step’ translates as *styv-* *styvmoder*, *styvfader*, *styvson*, *styvdotter* for stepmother, stepfather, stepson and stepdaughter. The stepfamily terms ‘stief-moeder’, ‘stief-dochter’, ‘stief-vader’, ‘stief-zoon’ for stepmother, stepdaughter, stepfather and

stepson are used in a neutral way in the late sixteenth-century laws of the new Dutch Republic.³⁵ Similarly, in the sixteenth-century Dutch translation of Vives, stepmother becomes 'stiefmoeder' and stepfather becomes 'stiefvader'; to convey a negative connotation, adjectives add the emphasis: 'een wreede stiefmoeder' or 'a cruel stepmother'.³⁶ By the nineteenth century, to be 'stiefnoderlijk' meant to be 'barbarous or cruel like a step-mother', but the other 'step' or *stief* terms such as *stiefouders* for step-parents were more neutral.³⁷ In the Catholic dispensation requests to marry in eighteenth-century Austria, Margareth Lanzinger has noted in chapter 10 that although *Stiefvater* existed as a German word, the petitions and letters mask the step relationship with the term *Vater* for father. In these German language sources, adding the adjective 'fremde', meaning a 'stranger', to stepmother (*die fremde Stiefmutter*) conveyed the sense that a new wife was from outside the family and perhaps more of a threat than close kin.³⁸

Relationships through blood or through marriage in some European languages seem to derive from the Latin due to the determination of degrees of consanguinity from canon law. For example, sisters of the same mother, literally sharing the same uterus but having different fathers, would be called *sorores uterinae* in German-speaking regions, in French *soeurs utérines*, while sisters sharing the bloodline of a father, but of separate mothers, would be termed *sorores consanguinae* in German works or in French *soeurs consanguines*.³⁹ Sylvie Perrier has observed in chapter 11 that in eighteenth-century Toulouse, notaries drawing up contracts were careful to use these terms along with *marâtre*, *parâtre* and *filâtre* to distinguish types of stepfamily relationships, although these distinctions were missing from the judicial courts and parish registers.⁴⁰ Swedish distinguished between the blood relationship of a shared parent, *halv-* for *halvsyskon* or half-siblings, and the relationship through the marriage of a parent such as stepbrother (*styvbror*), whereas Finnish made no distinction between stepsiblings and half-siblings; instead the suffix *puoli*, meaning half, served for both step relationships and shared blood relationships so that a *velipuoli* meant both stepbrother and half-brother. When the Swedish Land Law was translated into Finnish in the sixteenth century, *puoli* was used for step and half relationships.⁴¹

The use or absence of these terms in archival sources, laws, literature or diaries determines how difficult it is to find evidence of stepfamily relationships. Among notaries in Italy or Spain, or legal documents in England, the researcher needs to tease out the step relationships by finding phrases such as 'my other wife' or 'other husband', or 'her husband's children'. In the notarial records of late medieval Catalonia, documents noted a current husband's relationship to his wife, but not necessarily to her children if she had any. In early modern Venice, as Anna Bellavitis notes, there seems to have been a gender difference too in notarial documents, as remarried widows mentioned previous husbands but remarried widowers rarely, if ever, named their previous wives.⁴² In Scotland, the 'prevalence of brothers or sisters "germane" may be indications of a man's remarriage'.⁴³ Sometimes actions substituted and defined half-sibling relationships in the absence of terms. For example, as Coolidge explores in chapter 5, the illegitimate children of errant noble

husbands in seventeenth-century Spain might not be formally recognized, but the relationship could be expressed in roundabout phrases such as ‘the son of her husband’. As children, sons and daughters of a noble father might not be aware of the exact nature of their relationship with an illegitimate half-sibling, but when the noble household raised the child (in the household or locally) with a level of education and quality of clothing appropriate to his or her status as the child of a noble, the half-brother or half-sister situation might be commonly acknowledged in the community, although never directly communicated through the term ‘brother’ or ‘sister’.⁴⁴ In legitimation petitions, these actions and forms of support counted as much toward the success of ‘virtual stepfamilies’ in obtaining legal acknowledgment for the child as how they addressed each other. In central court records in early modern England, as Tim Stretton notes in chapter 6, the stepfamily dynamics are rarely noted on the surface, but must be unravelled as part of the web of kin relationships within the court case, a problem compounded by the interchangeable terms mother-in-law and stepmother or father-in-law and stepfather.⁴⁵

In eighteenth-century English literature, diaries and letters, the terms employed for step relations, half-siblings or in-laws overlapped. The simple terms used in the nuclear family such as ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ tended to be used for all these types of relationships created by marriage or remarriage in the 1700s.⁴⁶ So as Naomi Tadmor explains, ‘we find that mothers, step-mothers and mothers-in-law could be referred to and addressed in exactly the same way as “my mother” . . . just as siblings, half-siblings and siblings-in-law could all be referred to and addressed as “brother” and “sister”’.⁴⁷ At some moments, a surname might be added to distinguish the relationship, so that ‘my son Smith’ might indicate a stepson, but the practice was not consistent and the exact nature of relationships, whether full blood, step or half, or in-laws by marriage, ‘could be obscured, or at least remain ambiguous without the aid of additional information’.⁴⁸

A similar practice occurred in sixteenth-century Sweden, as Anu Lahtinen highlights in chapter 3, where the terms of endearment in letters addressed to a range of family members such as sisters or stepsisters suggest family cohesion or closeness of ties among the nobility of similar status. In the aristocratic circles of the Kingdom of Hungary in the 1600s, half-siblings raised in the same household referred to each other simply as ‘dear sister’ or ‘brother lord’ without making a distinction between full siblings or half-siblings, reflecting a ‘dense network of familial bonds constructed by an exchange of letters, greetings, gift and services’ with letters substituting as visits.⁴⁹ Amy Erickson has remarked upon whether these overlapping terms for steps, halves and fulls ‘argue against an especially antagonistic atmosphere’ in stepfamily households.⁵⁰ In chapter 11, too, Sylvie Perrier considers whether interchangeable kinship terms in eighteenth-century France, such as referring to a stepmother as an ‘aunt’, might indicate an affectionate bond forged by living together for many years.⁵¹

In many cases, these labels are cues for tenderness and warmth, but we need to be wary that in Tadmor’s eighteenth-century English examples, the nuclear family terms did not necessarily indicate a corresponding level of affection; a ‘mother’

might apply to a beloved mother as well as a despised mother-in-law or stepmother.⁵² Or in the Grimm brothers' fairy tale *The Juniper Tree*, the stepmother jealous of the first-born stepson beckons 'my son' (*myn Sön*) with an offer of an apple, and he innocently answers his 'Mother' (*Moeder*) but wonders why her face is so fierce as she pounces to kill him.⁵³

In French there was an increasing parallel use of *belle-mère* to mean stepmother or mother-in-law or *beau-père* to mean stepfather or father-in-law.⁵⁴ In the English language, the range and use of stepfamily terms seems to have expanded over time to accommodate these distinctions.⁵⁵ In Dutch law of the 1500s and 1600s, the separate terms for mother-in-law (*schoon-moeder*) and stepmother or daughter-in-law (*schoon-dochter*) and stepdaughter were already in circulation. A nineteenth-century Dutch-English dictionary warns its users how English conflates the two terms, and so if translating from English 'Brother-in-law' to the Dutch term, 'what might actually be meant' by it is brother-in-law (*schoonbroeder*) rather than stepbrother (*stiefbroeder*).⁵⁶ The Dutch even had a word for step-brother-in-law, *Stiefzwager*. Each European language had different ways to express the dynamics of stepfamilies.

Counting stepfamilies

It remains important to review why historical research has barely noticed stepchildren and to point out why our knowledge of stepfamilies in the past is patchy.⁵⁷ It is often difficult to ascertain what happened to children after the remarriage of a parent or after the death of a remarried parent when the surviving spouse was a step-parent. We risk being a 'dupe of the statistics' because of the available historical sources as well as the techniques and methods of counting family and household types.⁵⁸ Historical demographers used sources such as tax rolls or parish registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths to count the numbers of kin in the household, paying specific attention to relationships to the head of household, that is, kin by blood or by marriage. Unfortunately, the sources these population historians relied upon often lumped biological offspring together with stepchildren or foster children, and the demographers followed without making distinctions between types of dependants.⁵⁹ To unravel the complex web of family relationships, some corroboration or family reconstitution was necessary. For example, the way a register of souls (*personalbücher*) in eighteenth-century Estonia masks relationships between the occupants of a household becomes evident when the researcher reconstitutes the family using another source, such as a parish register of baptisms, marriages or deaths. Two 'daughters' of a head of household listed in the register of souls 'turned out to be offspring of a previous marriage of the wife' or stepdaughters, while the grandfather assumed to be the father of the head of the household 'proved to be the father of his wife's first husband'. Unfortunately, the soul revision registers, concerned mostly with the application of a tax, 'rarely distinguished' whether the children were from a first marriage or a remarriage, and the population historian needs to find a parallel source.⁶⁰

In a 1970s study of the village of Clayworth in Nottinghamshire, England, to examine 'parental deprivation', Peter Laslett became one of the few population

historians to count stepchildren as a separate category.⁶¹ Laslett relied upon the accuracy of the rector William Sampson's identifications in the rector's book of the parish – two listings of inhabitants of the village in 1674 and 1688 – to count all children resident in the village and then to separate out the 'parentally deprived' for his calculations.⁶² A close reading of the rector's book, however, reveals a number of errors, omissions, inconsistencies and a gender bias, some of them owing to the record, others to Laslett's lapse when, for example, counting stepchildren in 1674 as children in 1688.⁶³ The rector Sampson also privileged male householders, repeatedly singling out men who had multiple marriages but never describing a woman in the same way, although it is clear that a few widows remarried when the rector occasionally lists 'her children by a former husband'.⁶⁴

Laslett lists several categories of households and situations in which orphans lived: with a widowed mother as a lone parent, with a widowed father as sole parent, with a widowed mother and stepfather, or with a widowed father and step-mother. Laslett was a pioneer in the history of the family in the 1970s, and he explains sympathetically the challenge faced by step-parents and children adjusting to the new domestic arrangements after the death of a parent and the remarriage of the survivor.

The new wife and mother-substitute might have brought children of her own with her, as so frequently happened in Clayworth and Cogenhoe. This would have meant, of course that there were new brothers and sisters to get used to as well, new rivals for the father's affection. The attention of the mother would be unequally divided, too, between her own boys and girls, those of the man she had married and the ones she might have herself by him.⁶⁵

But with these comments, Laslett unwittingly calls into question his counting methods, because he did not include a category for the complex stepfamily he describes where a widow mother and widower father marry and combine their households. Husband and wife become both parent and step-parent in such a family constellation, with the possibility of adding children they would have together as a couple, half-siblings to the older children. Is the category for this type of blended family hidden among the widower fathers bringing stepmothers into their households or among the widows marrying new fathers for their children? Laslett readily admitted that the figures in his table placing his Nottinghamshire village in context across two centuries and nineteen English communities 'are a poor basis on which to generalize about pre-industrial English society' and that among these figures are 'less carefully counted places' than the village of Clayworth in the late seventeenth century.⁶⁶ Unfortunately for stepfamily researchers, even Clayworth was not that carefully counted.

By recognizing the limitations of historical demography for the study of step-families as it has been practiced so far – both the sources and the interpretations – this collection hopes to point the way to other potential sources on step-parents and stepchildren such as the rich potential of guardianship accounts, notarial archives,

the records of orphan chambers or ‘offices of wards’, the biographies in printed Protestant funeral works, Catholic dispensation requests for marriage, letters, law-suits, legal codes, diaries, songs, family portraits and cheap prints.

Remarriage shaping stepfamilies over four centuries: gender and decline

A whole range of factors affected the choice to remarry – the age of the surviving spouse, the presence or absence of children, and the number of children, as well as the trade or financial standing of the widowed spouse. The timing of when a family was broken by death might have a profound effect on the likelihood of remarriage for a surviving spouse. The ages of the half-orphaned children could either dissuade a parent from re-coupling or propel a widow or widower into a new blended family. For example, did infants or toddlers require constant care or was a youth old enough to be sent off to an apprenticeship? Were the older children able to help care for younger siblings or almost of an age to marry or take over aspects of a farm or artisanal workshop? A son or daughter nearing adulthood could step into some of the deceased parent’s roles and diminish the need to remarry.

Two general patterns of remarriage emerge in the centuries 1400 to 1800 to shape the experiences of stepfamilies. First of all, widowers remarried more often and more rapidly than widows.⁶⁷ In most remarriages in the European past, a widower father introduced a stepmother into the household to care for his half-orphaned children – the dreaded stepmother of fairy tales familiar to peasants and the nobility alike. So we must be mindful that unlike in the 2000s, when step-parents in a household are more likely to be stepfathers, in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries stepmothers were much more common.

Europe is a big and varied place, but a second overall trend of higher frequency of remarriage in the 1400s and 1500s, with a variable but steady decline into the 1800s, finds support in the cumulative evidence of many regional studies across these four centuries.⁶⁸ Following famine and then plague in the fourteenth century, remarriage rates rose to high-intensity post-Black Death levels. As the population recovered by the mid-sixteenth century, remarriage rates began to reduce, with periodic higher rates when wars flared and epidemics broke out. About 25 to 30 per cent of marriages in rural England in the 1500s involved a remarriage for one of the partners, and a long uneven decline continued into the 1800s to rates as low as 11 per cent.⁶⁹ It is worth noting that these English statistics covering the three centuries are for remarriages of widows and widowers combined; some were widowed parents, others childless.

From the 1400s to 1700s there was an increasingly divergent, gendered pattern to remarriage, as rates of remarriage fell more rapidly for females than for males. Looking more specifically at mothers in London after the Black Death in 1349–1458, Barbara Hanawalt found that 65 per cent of widows with children chose to remarry.⁷⁰ Across the English Channel in Flanders, in samples of marriage contracts in the bustling town of Douai for the year 1400, remarrying widows were

involved in 46 per cent of marriages, which fell to 30 per cent by the 1440s and 17 per cent by 1500. More than a third of the remarriage widows in the 1440s can be identified as mothers, but that is a minimum number.⁷¹ Jeremy Boulton found a distinct pattern of decline in female remarriage in the poor, labouring folk in London from 45 per cent in the early 1600s to 26 per cent in the early 1700s.⁷² Barbara Todd's samples from rural areas and market towns in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries demonstrate how widowers were 'almost as likely to remarry in the late seventeenth century as earlier'.⁷³ As Terence McIntosh observed about southern Germany from 1650 to 1750, 'the feature . . . that deserves particular attention is the moderate yet uninterrupted drop over time in the percentage of widows recorded in the marriage registers' a trend that 'was not true for widowers'.⁷⁴

The data directly measuring the remarriages of mothers and fathers are much harder to obtain than the raw rates of male and female remarriage, which then require a guess as to how many of those widowed spouses were also parents. An English sample from the mid 1500s to the early 1700s utilizing hundreds of probate inventories across a range of counties suggests about one in four marriages involved a widowed parent.⁷⁵ Among Amsterdam citizens of the middling sort in the mid to later 1700s, almost 46 per cent of widower fathers welcomed a wife and stepmother, while only 24 per cent of widow mothers introduced a stepfather to their child or children.⁷⁶

If widowers remarried more frequently, who did they remarry? Widowers preferred brides who were younger and had never married before.

In south-western Finland, twenty percent of marriages between 1738 and 1811 were second marriages for at least one of the partners. Nearly twelve percent were those of a widower marrying a spinster, while slightly less than seven percent were those of a widow marrying a bachelor. In less than three percent of cases did a widow and a widower contract a marriage.⁷⁷

This pattern remains consistent across Europe from sixteenth-century Devon to eighteenth-century southern Germany, Italy, Estonia and France.⁷⁸ We cannot know that the widowers in these remarriage studies were fathers, but can still discern a trend. If these remarriage widowers were fathers, then they preferred a younger never-married woman as a stepmother to their children, that is, a woman who did not bring her own children to the marriage. This younger bride could extend the widower's fertility far longer than if his previous wife had survived, and the chapters in this collection affirm the regularity of this stepfamily pattern. Looking at the presence of dependent children as a variable in remarriage choices, Fauve-Chamoux summarizes studies of England, Italy and France: 'the more men had children, the quicker and the more often they remarried, while for widows the presence of children was an impediment to remarriage, slowing it down in case it happened'.⁷⁹ Although it might be familiar from *Cinderella*, in most places and times widow and widower couples were the least-popular marriage choice among