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4.1 INTRODUCTION

Earlier chapters in this thesis examined prehistoric and ancient society for insight into stress experienced by female participants in the primary and secondary educational milieus. In this section of the thesis, an analysis of the problem in the context of the European Middle Ages (approximately 500 AD to 1500 AD), may contribute to our understanding of the problem. According to Wittgenstein, past ways of thinking and behaving continue throughout history, although unchanging habits differ in the constantly altering context of daily lives (Wittgenstein 1984: 4e; 1988: 6.4311). In other words, although historical context may have played a role in medieval female stress experience, female biopsychosocial identity common to other eras might have been a factor underpinning the time bound stressors, manifestations and coping strategies regarding stress experienced by women and girls during the Middle Age (Hume 2000: 14-15, 32; Leibenluft 1999; 25-33; Brizer 1993: 170).

There appears to be an awareness of the concept of stress in the Middle Ages. The term stress is used in the York Mystery Plays, written during the fifteenth and sixteenth century. The verbalisation of the concept in a dramatic presentation, which was firmly rooted in the social, economic and devotional context of the late Middle Ages, lends support to the presence of this affective disorder in the lives of women and girls.

The following extract from lines 155, 156 and 157 of the thirtieth York Mystery Play reveals the use of the term stressed in reference to a female experience of emotional pain. The character, Filius, uses the word whilst conversing with two others, Ancilla and Domina:

Ancilla: Madame, anone all dewly is dressid.
Filius: With no stalkyng nor no striffe be ye stressed.
Domina: Nowe be yhe in pese, both youre carpyng and crye

(Corpus 2003: 1)

The term distress features in a medieval text such as the following extract from Caxton’s Blanchardyn and Eglantine of 1489 that refers to an abused female victim of attempted rape:

The he heard the pittifull complaint that a Lady made, to appease the raging lust of a villaine, who sought perforce to rauish her: whom presently hee found, hid under the shadow of a leafye tree, beating ye poore distressed Lady, the wife.

(Corpus 2003: 1)
4.2 CAUSES OF STRESS IN THE FEMALE PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEDIEVAL PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL MILIEUS

As contemporary research into chemicals carrying messages between brain nerve cells has revealed, distress is due to a chemical imbalance in the brain that may have occurred in medieval women and girls who were psychobiologically the same as their female ancestors and descendents. They too may have responded with negative stress when confronted with challenges that were particular to the time. Moreover, many stressors may have been rooted in female sociobiopsychosocio identity that was generally negatively perceived during the Middle Ages as in past eras (Burns & Burns 2002: 1). Many influential thinkers of the time such as Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), medieval Italian philosopher and theologian, viewed the female gender as inferior (Carroll 2000: 1). In fact Saint Thomas does not mention females in his work *Summa Theologiae* and speaks only of man being made in God’s image (Aquinas 1969: 94). Moreover, he mentions only ‘a good man’ (Aquinas 1969: 104).

At macro-level in society and culture, there were stressors such as: war; disease; the medieval female social role; the female position regarding medieval Law; the perception of the Church and the persecution of Jewish women and so-called witches. At meso-level in the family and school, there were stressors such as: expectations of females as healers; responsibilities in the home; uncomfortable homes; uncomfortable marriages; domestic violence; pressure to bear children; thwarted motherhood; frustrated educational aspirations; dismal life in a nunnery and cruel parental discipline. At micro-level in the individual self there may have been possible causes of stress such as physical mutilation; negative physical or occupational self image; uncomfortable dress; rape or sexual abuse; denial of female sexuality; sudden transition to adulthood; lack of self-expression; stifled ambition; multiple roles; loneliness; subordination of personal identity to material worth as well as intellectual and moral frustration.

4.2.1 Stressors at macro-level in society and culture

A negative perception of femaleness in medieval society to the point of suppressing maternal and sexual identity may have been an overriding factor regarding the stress experienced by women and girls during the Middle Ages when they confronted particular stressors at macro-level.
4.2.1.1 Female suffering due to war

Although noncombatant and powerless to affect political outcomes, females were faced with the repercussions of the many medieval battles and skirmishes that took place. They suffered from ‘the movement of armies, the recruitment of troops, the sacking of cities and the devastations of the countryside, all of which were common activities during wartime’ (Amt 1993: 95).

Simeon of Durham, a monk living in northern England during the early twelfth century, describes the stressful consequences of an attack in AD 1011 on Canterbury, England by the Danes. Apart from general massacre and torture of civilians by, for example the sword or burning, women and girls, in particular, were dragged by the hair through the streets of the city and thrown into flames. Infants were torn from their breasts, carried on pikes, or crushed to pieces by a wagon driven over them. He makes note of the rape, abuse and murder of women and girls during another Danish attack, in AD 1013, on the southern Mercians of England. Another account of King Malcolm of Scotland’s attack on the English in 1070 alludes to the beheading and spiking of both of men and women of all ages (Amt 1993: 95-96).

4.2.1.2 Impact of disease on females

The English King Edward III’s Royal Proclamation concerning *Exclusion of Lepers* (1346) reveals the socially accepted belief that women were particularly responsible for the spread of leprosy, a particular problem in the medieval world. The documents particularly blamed women and girls for disseminating the disease in places such as brothels (Amt 1993: 114).

Female caregivers who witnessed the death of children, other relatives and friends en masse during times of diseases such as the bubonic plague, must have felt intense emotional pain. Female would have been particularly affected by this terrible disease, in their role as tenders and nurturers in medieval society. Stress due to the bubonic plague was described by Leonor Lopez de Cordoba, in her autobiography, which was written during the 14th and 15th century. She writes about her agony and suffering due to the bubonic plague. The plague caused her to lose children and other relatives. This disease was not only terrifying in itself with its fatal and thoroughly painful symptoms, but also led to personal despair for friends and relatives. The disease first appeared in Europe in the fourteenth century and killed over a quarter of a million before the end of that century. It continued, thereafter, in sporadic outbursts until the 1660s (Kaminsky & Dorough Johnson 1987: 80; Dowling 2003: 1)
4.2.1.3 Medieval female social role

Females played a subservient role played by women and girls in the Middle Ages. The medieval ideal was the silent and long-suffering female participant in the mainly primary educational milieu, the woman at home, whose duty was limited to the affairs of the family and the house (Jarret 1994: 73).

Women and girls were considered inferior and evil, an opinion rooted in the Church and its interpretation of Biblical images of women. Medieval literature elaborated on this representation of females who ‘led men astray’. This included French didactic poems, which detailed the vices of women. The concept of the female temptress, an obstacle in the way of salvation even in matrimony, permeated medieval society (Power 1975: 15-16; 29-39).

Women were subservient in all levels of society and even noblewomen had to pass inherited wealth to husbands, even though they showed themselves perfectly capable of overseeing properties when their men went to war for example. Nor, were they allowed ownership if widowed or orphaned (Amt 1993: 119). Under the feudal system both the lands and the lives of widows, daughters and minor sons, were under the direct feudal control of their feudal lord (Amt 1993: 154).

With the rise of the middle class during later the last three centuries of the Middle Ages, society’s negative perception of females took on another hue. Women and girls were also seen as ill-tempered and scolding harridans and shrews. The famous poet Chaucer’s Wife of Bath in his Canterbury Tales, portrays this image of females, who having shed the bonds of traditional subjugation, had allowed power to turn them into unpleasant and nagging individuals the complete opposite of the ‘good woman’ who was much more esteemed (Power 1975: 10-11).

The middle class disliked empowering women and girls and generally forbade full female membership of its workers’ guilds, even if women and girls practised crafts such as spinning and weaving. They were not given the official professional recognition normally granted to men by means of guilds (Power 1975: 61-62; Amt 1993: 197-199)). The Livre des Métiers or Book of Crafts, written in about 1270 by Etienne de Boileau, contains a collection of the regulations of Parisian craft guilders that were male apprentices, workers and masters (Amt 1993: 194-196).

The working class perceived its female members in a negative light, even though they worked as much as men in fields, on farms and in domestic service. Not only did female workers
receive less pay than men and boys for the same amount of work, at church on their days off, they heard that they were considered as the root of all evil. And, at markets and fairs, they would hear *jongleurs* (street performers) telling *contes gras fabliaux* (stories and dramas), which ridiculed women and girls (Gies, Frances & Joseph 1978: 154; Power 1975: 68-71).

The contemporary American psychologist, Carol Gilligan (1933 - ) states that her research into Westernised girls during the twentieth century revealed that ‘social expectations can crush a girl’s spirit and shut down her confidence’ (Carol Gilligan 1996: 30). This may have been the case with female participants in the medieval educational milieus, when they perceived their low social status.

### 4.2.1.4 Legal status of females

The Law supported the medieval perception of females as second-class citizens (Power 1975: 10). For example, early 13th century laws stated that widows were minors and, therefore, under the protection of the Church, who allowed them a mere portion of their husbands’ goods or land (*Norman Laws Chapters III, IV, V*, in Amt 1993: 53-54). In addition, widowed mothers were not allowed to have custody of orphaned male heirs (*Norman Laws Chapter XXXV* in Amt 1993: 55). Male heirs could force females to leave inherited lands, although they could also allow mothers to retain a quarter of the inheritance but this was rare. Widows were usually given what other male members of the family chose to give them. (Shirlig 2000a: 1).

Medieval law discriminated against women and girls by punishing females for crimes committed by males. For example, a wife was supposed to follow her husband into exile. She could only return, when her husband had died (*Norman Laws Chapter XXXV* in Amt 1993: 56). Moreover, the laws of Sicily of 1231 discriminated against women in rape cases, for which the female party was blamed, even if she had laid the charge. However, the accused could escape the charge by marrying the accusing woman (Amt 1993: 62). Sicilian law meted out severe punishment against females in adultery cases. For instance, a wife who had committed adultery was condemned to slitting of the nose or public flogging. The law also condoned that a husband may kill his wife and the adulterer on the spot, if he caught them in the act of adultery. Yet, male adulterers were merely to have their property confiscated and not even that if they had children (Amt 1993: 68-69). The law was harsh in matters of female sexual crimes and sanctioned violence committed against ‘lascivious women’, prostitutes and mothers, who ‘publicly prostitute their daughters’ (Amt 1993: 68-69).
London records of Crimes and Punishments (14th century) reveal harsh punishment for women criminals. For example, Desiderata de Toryntone was hanged for stealing 30 dishes and 24 silver saltcellars (Amt 1993: 73).

4.2.1.5 Perception of the Church regarding women and girls

The Church held conflicting negative perceptions of the feminine gender in terms of the sinful Eve, on the one hand, and glorious Mary, Mother of God who embodied holy perfection in the form of denial of human sexuality and reproduction on the other. Yet, it viewed females as being frail, in need of protection and only suitable restricted religious ministries. For example, they could not ‘presume to baptize’ or ‘teach men in the assembly’ (Amt 1993: 219-220; Power 1975: 14, 34). In some cases, prohibition against female physical presence within the church grounds was also a reality. Simeon of Durham, England, in an account written in the late eleventh or early twelfth century describes a situation of gender-segregated churches (Amt 1993: 232).

For Jewish women and girls in particular there may have been much stress due to the Church’s denigration of Jews. The latter were blamed for the death of Christ and were victims of persecution, massacres and expulsions from the time of the First Crusade. They were also resented for their wealth from trade and money lending in medieval towns, the latter being disallowed for Christians (Amt 1993: 277-285).

4.2.1.6 Witches

Trials and executions of women believed to be witches started in 1444 in Hamburg, Germany and continued for many years in Europe. In 1484, Pope Innocent III officially condemned witchcraft ‘as an alliance with the Devil himself’. Thomas Aquinas supported the notion that demons were involved and that ‘old women could actually hurt children by giving them the evil eye’. Victims of persecution were women, who often delved in healing practices by means of ‘potions, charms, and incantations, which they either taught themselves or learned as apprentices’. Their persecutors believed that demons had identified which plants and herbs to mix to make potions with both good and harmful effects (Johnson 2000a: 1). During the era, nine million women and girls were burned as witches during ‘the burning times’ for being healers or wise and outspoken individuals (Northrup 1998: 714). Hunted, imprisoned and tortured in the presence of a judge who would be present whilst victims were tortured until confession and/or condemnation to death, these and other females entered into a collective field
of fear and pain that had lasted for thousands of male-dominated society but took on a particularly terrifying form during the Middle Ages (Johnson 2000a: 1).

4.2.2 Stressors at meso-level in the family, peer group and school

As at macro-level, negative perception of female inherited hormonal, psychological and social inherited identity mediated negative stress in female participants in the medieval primary and secondary educational milieu when faced with stressors at meso-level in the informal educational milieu of the home and more formal learning situations of, for example, the religious convent. As mothers, caregivers and educators, as well as daughters and other female individuals in the process of becoming adult, women and girls would have been exposed to various stressors whilst fulfilling their natural and nurtured roles as society’s nurturers. Examples of these stressors in the primary educational situation of the home were: expectations as healers; responsibilities in the home; uncomfortable homes; uncomfortable marriages; domestic violence; pressure to bear children and thwarted motherhood. In the secondary formal educational situation, stressors may have included frustrated educational aspirations and dismal life in a nunnery.

4.2.2.1 Females expected to be healers

In an age of fast spreading disease, combat wounds, hunting injuries, as well as other severe health and medical problems, customary dependence on female members for the health maintenance of the household for treatment, would have been a great responsibility. Only royal households would have had a doctor in attendance, thus placing the onus of healing and first aid on female family members in poorer households. As informal medical practitioners, women and girls practised their craft, based on experience and skills handed down from generation to generation. In fact, medieval medical practice and surgery, a feminine chore that was dangerous in light of the many witch-hunts, involved mainly practical expertise until the fifteenth century (Johnson 2000a: 1; Carr 2003: 1; Medical Museum 2003: 1).

4.2.2.2 Responsibilities in the home

Although male heads of the family were not in as complete control in medieval times, as in Ancient Greek and Roman times and women and girls were often brought up to be in charge of the household, they never held positions of civic or economic importance. In spite of being unworthy in their own right, female family members were expected to support often absent
husbands and other male relatives as well as raising children and contributing significantly to household chores (Gallagher 2000: 1; Shirlig 2000b: 1). Women and girls had many duties to perform in the family and home during the Middle Ages in addition to looking after babies and children. Generally, the onus fell on the middle and upper, as well as working class housewife to maintain order in the household. Once a couple was married, the woman's role was very important. She was often left in charge of the household including financial matters, while her husband was away on wars and crusades (Reynolds 2000a: 1). The following quotation, taken from Anthony Fitzeherbert's *The Boke of Husbandry*, clearly paints a picture of peasant female life in the Middle Ages:

...and when you are up and ready, then first sweep the house, set the table, and put everything in your house in order. Milk your cows, suckle your calves, strain your milk, get your children up and dress them, and provide for your husband's breakfast, dinner, supper, and for your children and servants, and take your place with them. Send corn and malt to the mill so that you can bake and brew whenever there is need...You must make butter and cheese whenever you are able, feed your pigs both morning and evening, and give your poultry their food in the morning...It is a wife's occupation to winnow all kinds of grain, to make malt, to wash and wring, to make hay, reap corn, and in time of need to help her husband fill the muck-wain or dung cart, drive the plough, load hay, corn, and such other, and to go or ride to the market, sell butter, cheese, milk, eggs, chickens, capons, hens, pigs, geese, and all types of grain, and also to buy all sorts of things necessary for the household, and to make a true reckoning and account to her husband of what she has spent...

(Goldberg 1995: 167-168)

Housekeeping was complicated even for the upper class lady who had many servants. She would have to provide clothes and food for large families as well as guests (Power 1975: 46-50; Amt 1993: 164-165). Wives of prosperous middleclass merchants also had heavy domestic responsibilities. In fact, *Le Menagier de Paris* written by a very old French bourgeois writer of the late 15th century for his very young wife of 15 explains her many domestic duties (Power 1975: 51-52, 56-57).

4.2.2.3 Uncomfortable domestic sphere

In addition to being onerous, life was comfortless for medieval women and girls whether they lived in huts, small one-room cottages or larger long houses with a possible second floor or castles during the Middle Ages. In fact, home life for female peasants, crafters, as well as
nobility was harsh and uncomfortable and provided little relief from daily burdens. Animals and many individuals were compelled to share crowded living conditions (Miller 2002b: 1).

Despite physical discomfort at home, marriage itself was most often a loveless business arrangement. Loneliness and lack of interpersonal communication may have caused tension and stress in women and girls facing this life (Brogan 2000: 1; Louw & Edwards 1993: 636). Couples married for financial reasons and, in the case of the nobility, to unite families for political power and alliances especially in war and to increase property and wealth by means of a girl’s dowry or sons as heirs (Shirlig 2000a: 1). Medieval girls had no choice with regard to their marriage partners. Many would join their usually much older husbands at the minimum legal age of 12 because women were expected to die sooner than men do and to produce children as soon as possible. In fact, Augustan marriage laws of AD 9 penalized women who had not delivered a baby by age 20. Even peasant marriages were financially grounded in the dowry system. Courtship and romantic love did not accompany matrimonial agreements and respect and friendship were the only likely relational advantages to the marriage. Marriage rarely involved romantic or sexual love, since in keeping with the early Christian Pauline concept, it was ‘a way to make up for the weakness of the flesh’ ... preferable to adultery and lascivious behaviour’ and for ‘procreation and mutual companionship’ (Divver 2000: 1). Yet, a woman was, in theory, bound to that marriage for life, although annulment did take place, in rare cases, but only on the insistence of the husband (Reynolds 2000a: 1; Shirlig 2000b; Amt 1993: 20, 30; 82; Power 1975: 40).

Women were subservient partners in medieval marriages. Based on Biblical Pauline principles, the Church and aristocracy firmly established and entrenched this concept (Power 1975: 10, 15-16; Amt 1993: 317-330). Moreover, so-called ‘disobedient wives were liable to correction by force’. This included wife beating (Power 1975: 18-19). In fact, even a wealthy noble heiress was ‘as much a chattel tied to the soil as was the manorial villein’ (Power 1975: 19). Despite the misery and pressure of medieval marriage, there was no respectable place in feudal society for women who did not marry except the convent. Often they were even prevented from finding refuge in this outlet too (Power 1975: 41; Amt 1993: 136-142).

Marriage for girls during the Medieval Ages must have been undeniably agonizing. Guibert de Nogent, a French noble wrote about the life of his mother in his autobiography in 1115. He mentions that his mother ‘was hardly of marriageable age’, when she ‘was given to my father, ... by provision of my grandfather. Guibert also spoke of the ‘abuse that was aimed at her’, following a three year delay in the consummation of her marriage to his father (Amt 1993: 145). Osman (2000:1) maintains that marriage vows may have been a source of despair for girls
during the Middle Ages and quotes a wedding ceremony that ‘included some interesting variations in the vows for men and those for woman’. According to Osman the man would promise to marry ‘for better or worse, for richer or poorer, for fairer or fouler’ whereas the wife would promise to marry ‘for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to be bonny and buxom at bed and at board’. In addition, ‘many times, only the woman wore a ring, unless it was a ‘double-ring’ ceremony’ (Osman 2000: 1).

Upper-calls marriages were lonely affairs for medieval women owing to spousal absence. Christine de Pisan (1365-1430) in The Book of Three Virtues (1405) specifically mentions noblewomen who ‘spend much of their lives in households without husbands … usually … at court or in distant countries’ (Amt 1993: 164).

Marriage and family life in general during the Middle Ages involved physical abuse for its female participants. In fact, medieval customs encouraged men to beat their wives and daughters or female relatives regularly. The thirteenth century code in France, Customs of Beauvais, advised that ‘men may be excused for the injuries they inflict on their wives, nor should the law intervene. Provided that he neither kills nor maims her, it is legal for a man to beat his wife’. A medieval Spanish law allowed men to kill adulterous fiancées or wives plus their lovers, without facing criminal charges. Another English law established a century later allowed a man to ‘correct’ his wife in whatever manner was suitable (Carroll 2000: 1).

Life was possibly also unbearable in the domestic sphere for females because married women and girls were under tremendous pressure to bear children. The author of a 13th century work entitled In Holy Maidenhood - a Debate on Marriage expresses this idea powerfully:

If she cannot breed, she is called barren. Her lord loveth and respects her less; and she, as one that is very bad, weepeth at ther fate, and calleth them glad and happy that breed a family

(Amt 1993: 92)

4.2.2.4 Thwarted motherhood

Although medieval mothers had and were expected to have large families, there was a high death rate for children. Mothers and other caregivers must have felt the stress of these deaths. Mothers were generally not even allowed to fulfil their maternal roles with regard to surviving children. In upper class families, new-borns were sent to wet nurses, and older boys and girls were sent away to noble households to learn good manners as young as seven when they worked as servants or apprentices (Power 1975: 41; Amt 1993: 94; Wincovitch 2000b: 1). This loss of
children through death or separation would have been stressful, especially since mothers had experienced all the danger and pain of pregnancy, labour and childbirth. Guibert de Nogent mentions his mother’s ‘anguish ... pains long-endured ... and tortures’ of childbirth (Amt 1993: 143).

Mothers of all classes were often forced to separate from their children during the Middle Ages. For example, a mother was not allowed to witness the baptismal ceremony, which was usually carried out straight after the birth of her child. This was because she was considered to be ‘unclean’ for six weeks after giving birth’ (Smith 2001d: 1). Working mothers had to leave their children at home or in the care of strangers, while they worked in the fields or elsewhere. Moreover, they had to resort to swaddling their babies and leaving them alone in cradles for a large part of the day. When older, these babies were tied to their cradles, to stop their crawling around and falling into danger. In fact, accidents often occurred anyway, and cradle fires were the major cause of death in babies as well as scalding by hot liquids in overturned pots. Other children in the care of people, who did not pay them proper attention, wandered off and met accidental death by drowning, for instance (Smith 2001a: 1; Smith 2001c: 1).

Frustration and lack of respect for the natural and nurtured role as nurturer would have mediated stress. In this regard, the medieval author of *In Holy Maidenhood - a Debate on Marriage* writes ‘to deter women from marriage and to encourage them to enter religious life (Amt 1993: 93). Life was hard for female primary and secondary educational caregivers who were not allowed to show natural maternal sentiments (Hanawalt 1986: 187).

### 4.2.2.5 Frustrated educational aspirations of women and girls

Although many medieval women and girls were educated in certain skills, it was generally believed that they ‘should remain illiterate’ unless a member of a female religious congregation. It was feared that reading and writing would lead to evil thoughts and behaviour in females. Even nuns were often only educated with regard to the Bible and the teachings of the Church. Some noble women and girls were only given a religious education, and middle class women in England were taught limited vocational and basic numeracy and literacy (Winovitch 2000c: 1). It was feared that women who learnt to read and write might simply use their skills to correspond with lovers and, generally become insubordinate. Therefore, they were restricted to reading the Scripture (Power 1975: 81-82; Labarge 1986: 38-53). The educational writings of French writers Philippe de Navarre and the Knight of La Tour Landry reveal that female informal and formal education involved the learning of social graces, religious instruction and
'good manners, good religion and good house craft’ and took place mostly in nunnery schools and great households (Power 1975: 76,78; 81-82).

Girls in noble household were given a frivolous training in the rules of courtly love, often based on the Roman writer Ovid’s *Art of Love*. These girls studied poetry, the most famous being two long French poems of the 13th century by Robert de Boils and Jacques dampens. Other accomplishments were ‘hawking, playing chess; telling stories, responding with witty repartee, singing and playing on various musical instruments’. More than a basic literacy was not acceptable (Power 1975: 79; Amt 1993: 119). Likewise, middle class girls had to focus on learning how to be good and pious wives, as revealed in treatises such *Le Menagier de Paris*, the little English poem *How the Goodwife taught her daughter* and Christine de Pisa's *Livre des Trois Versus*, which was used by other classes too (Power 1975: 81-82).

The idea of higher education for women and even the training of female medical practitioners only became a reality towards the end of the Middle Ages, although it was socially unacceptable for females to teach, as they were considered to be lacking in reason or intelligence and controlled by their emotions. In addition, it was feared that they might inspire feeling of lust in their male pupils (Wincovitch 2000a: 1).

4.2.2.6 Dismal life in a nunnery

Instead of becoming wives and mothers, girls of noble birth or daughters of wealthy townsmen and merchants entered convents and there found primary and secondary educational milieus as brides of Christ teaching and learning both formally and informally from mostly other religious females (Power 1975: 89-90). It was a stressful life, however and daily life was conducted according to a strict routine of prayer, study and labour. A nun had seven monastic services to say daily. She rose at 2:00, went to chapel for the religious observances of *Matins*, followed by *Lauds*, whereupon she returned to bed at dawn to sleep for three hours. Rising again at 6 a.m., she labored and studied throughout the day, following other prayer rituals at specific times (*Prime, Tierce, Set, None, Vespers* and *Comp line*). The last rite was at 7 p.m. in winter and 8 p.m. in summer, after which she was supposed to go straight to bed and sleep for about six hours until the early morning services. Nuns supposed to devote themselves to work during the day (digging, haymaking, embroidering, reading). Moreover, each nun had domestic or farm chores. In addition, many nuns managed the household like the lady of the manor; even directing servants after the 13th century in wealthy convents. In small and poor nunneries, there was the additional stress of continual monetary problems worsened by the lack of business acumen on the part of most nuns. The nuns in these convents often lacked sufficient food and
lived in derelict houses that had, perhaps been damaged by fire or flood. At times, nuns were helpless female victims during periods of political upheaval. For example, nunneries in the north of England suffered raids from tribes of Scots. Stress relief through sharing with others and companionship was not often possible for a medieval nun. For, with the exception of short periods of rest and relaxation, they were usually to remain silent and communicate with others only via sign language (Power 1975: 90-93).

Certain reclusive female religious orders, such as those of the anchoresses and the Beguines, offered their members ‘stringent monastic rules’. The thirteenth century English text, *The Ancrene Riwle*, lays out severe regulations for a community of anchoresses. It prescribes ‘fasting … enduring cold, wearing haircloth and such other hardships’. Even flagellation to the point of bleeding was condoned (Amt 1993: 252, 259). Member of the Beguines religious order were also ‘required to fast frequently on bread and water, avoid soft linen clothes and use straw pallets instead of beds’ (Amt 1993: 265). Not only did nunneries deny female sexuality and nurturing instincts, they dulled the minds of its participants in religious primary and secondary educational milieus with a grueling lifestyle that was perceived in a positive light as being sacred and worthy of eternal rewards. This perception of female religious life was a total negation of female identity rooted in nature and nurture throughout history.

4.2.2.7 Harsh discipline meted out to women and girls

Women and girls were treated harshly in their own homes, or in homes where they had been sent to live as apprentices or attendants. The Middle Ages ‘took a stern view of parental responsibility’, and parents ‘exacted rigid respect and obedience’. Both boys and girls were beaten constantly’ (Power 1975: 83). Margaret Paston, who wrote the Paston Letters during the fifteenth century bullied and treated her daughter in an overly harsh manner (Power 1975: 46, 82, 85). Ascham, the English scholar of the sixteenth century writes in his work *The Schoolmaster* about Lady Jane Gray who was abusively treated by her parents and ‘so sharply taunted, so cruelly threatened … presently sometimes with pinches, nips and bobs’ (Power 1975: 83).

4.2.3 Stressors at micro-level in the female self

In addition to being faced with stressors in society at large and in the family, training situation or nunnery, the female participants in the primary and secondary educational milieus of the Middle Ages may have had to deal with stressors that occurred at a physical or psychological level that were also often related to gender-related sociopsychobiological vulnerability factors.
4.2.3.1 Physical mutilation

Not only did girls and women have to wear metal chastity belts in Medieval England ‘to prevent promiscuity during their husbands’ absence’ evidence suggests that female genital mutilation was also a reality in different societies and places during the Middle Ages. The practice, which originated during ancient times has continued throughout history for various reasons including a so-called cure for psychological problems. Records show that practices such as clitoridectomy, that predate Christianity and Islam continued in various ways throughout the Middle Ages in various parts of the world until present times. In ancient Rome, metal rings were passed through the labia minora of slaves to prevent procreation. Evidence from mummified bodies reveals that, in ancient Egypt, both excision and infibulation were performed termed *Pharaonic circumcision*. Similar mutilation occurred during medieval times (*Female Genital Mutilation* 2000: 1).

Atrocious medical procedures may have also caused stressful physical problems for women and girls in medieval times. For example, surgery performed by midwives was often barbaric, as in the case of extraction of dead babies from wombs. If medicine, including the milk of a mother of a dead baby, failed to cause the baby to be expelled, the pregnant women would be made, for example, to ‘sit over a smoldering fire of donkey’s dung with the hopes that the baby would be smoked out’. Other methods involved ‘securing hooks into the baby’ and brutally extracting the whole body or in sections after dismembering the foetus (Wincovitch 2000a: 1).

4.2.3.2 Gender-related taboos

The Middle Ages supported taboos of blood, greed, gluttony, pride, avarice, uncleanness and lust. These elements and aspects of life were often associated with female participants in the primary and secondary milieus, which would have led to a negative physical self-concept exacerbating feelings of tension in girls and women under pressure at macro, meso and micro-level. The negative perception of menstruation would have made females outcast because of the blood taboo. So would have female involvement in any occupations that required working with blood such as working in butchery. It was believed that nature was negatively affected during a girl or women’s menstrual period. For example, wine turned sour, crops and insects died and dogs’ bites became poisonous from the odour in the air. The medieval belief in the polluting effect of female menstruation, which probably had Biblical roots, simply denied females their

Greed and gluttony were often associated with food and drink, frequently prepared and served by women and girls, who were thus undermined in their natural tendency to nurture others. Activities involving the exchange of money were ‘condemned, black-listed or simply detested’, since they were linked to the concept of avarice and pride. Naturally, this negativity would have further tainted the self-image of females who carried out commercial activities, especially prostitution, who were seen as exemplars of lust as well. Female dyers, textile workers, laundrymen, and dishwashers were despised for their dirty work, and may have felt much stress because of this belittlement (Carper 2000a: 1).

4.2.3.3 Cumbersome dress

Cumbersome clothing may have been another source of stressful physical burden and emotional irritation in female participants in the medieval educational milieu, and the higher the social status the more elaborate the dress. Moreover, it became more unwieldy during the second half of the era. Peasant women wore garments of heavy course wool, and the dress of wealthier females was a complicated mixture of silk, wool and fur dresses and cloaks. Rich and poor wore more than one layer, although peasant women were thought to be insufficiently clothed in winter compared to wealthy females bedecked with layers of cloth, jewelry and other accessories (Power 1975: 30; Stiles 2000: 1)

4.2.3.4 Sexual abuse

Evidence shows that rape was a frequently reported crime in the Middle Ages and victims were women and girls of all classes. In fact, the training of knights often involved the abduction and rape of the lady of the castle (Moritz 1998: 1). Although punishment was severe, conviction was difficult to achieve.

Female servants, especially girls of the lower classes, were often seduced, sexually abused and exploited often under the pretext of sexual initiation by their masters. Moreover, legal evidence reveals that nuns were often victims of rape. This was possibly due to their stereotypical images of purity propagated by the Church, which abusive males wished to destroy (Goodich 1987: 119-120; Smith 2001e: 1). Women and girls were also often naïve enough to be seduced by male acquaintances (Johnson 2000b: 1). Family, friends and priests often forced girls, who did
not marry young of all classes, into ‘sexual initiation’ and even prostitutes who hoped to please their customers with new ‘fare’ (Smith 2001: 1).

Medieval women were not positively perceived as sexual beings and were only allowed sexual relationships in moderation in marriage for procreative purposes and outside of marriage as an outlet for male lust. Moreover, husbands could divorce their wives if it was discovered that they were not virgins before marriage (Shirlig 2000b: 1; Mason 2001: 1). There were even rules for sex, which was forbidden at certain times such as:

-when a woman is menstruating, pregnant, or nursing
-during lent, advent, Whitsun week, and Easter week
-on feast days, fast days, Sundays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays
-during the daylight
-if you are naked
-if you are in a church
-unless you are trying to produce a child

(Wilkin 2001: 1)

Further restrictions included:

-no fondling, no lewd kisses, no oral sex, no strange positions, only once, try not to enjoy it, and wash afterwards.

(Wilkin 2001: 1)

Denial of sexual pleasure went as far as forcing wives during the Late Middle Ages to wear a nightshirt with a ‘strategically placed hole in it, through which a pious husband might impregnate his wife with the minimal risk of experiencing pleasure in the discharge of his duty’. Moreover, although prostitution (unofficially accepted socially) allowed men a sexual outlet not allowed to them in marriage, prostitutes were considered evil and punished as criminals (Weaver 2000a: 1; Amt 1993: 210).

Not only were marriages in medieval society devoid of passion, but love outside of marriage, for example courtly love, exalted by troubadours (traveling singers) was considered shameful. This made girls and women ‘merely the objects of desire’ (Kleinbach 2001a: 1; Bogin 1976: 1-192).

Denial of female sexuality even extended to shame associated with the female body. It was not considered acceptable for women and girls to show their bodies to male medical practitioners.
The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio speaks of the refusal of females to reveal any part of their bodies during the 1348 plague in Florence (Amt 1993: 117).

**4.2.3.5 Sudden transition to adulthood**

Girls had to grow up quickly during the Middle Ages. In fact, maturity in terms of the law was between 12 and 14 when upper class girls entered marriage along with its domestic responsibilities and the lower classes joined the world of work early in life. Working class girls often had to ‘sign a service of apprentice contract’ at 14 to 16 years of age, or even at 10, although this was not legal (Shirlig 2000b: 1)

**4.2.3.6 Lack of self-actualization**

Females were not allowed to express themselves as individuals. Men wrote most of the gender-biased literature of the time as Chaucer’s wife of Bath in the *Canterbury Tales* complained:

> Who peyntede the leoun, tel me who?  
> By god, if wommen hadde written stories  
> As clerkes han with-inne hir oratories  
> They wold han written of men more wikkedness  
> Than all the mark of Adam may redesse

(Power 1975: 13-14)

There were literary works by women such as the love letters of Heloise, reflections of female religious and poets such as the troubadour Countess Beatrice of Die and the famous writer of *lais*, known as Marie de France. But, female writers did not speak of strictly female issues before Christine de Pisan, who wrote works like *Le Livre des Trois Vertus (The Book of the Three Virtues)*, for the edification of women and girls. De Pisan knew about female distress, having been an abused wife, whose husband had left her for a young widow with a family to support. It was also possible that her treatises were, thus, aimed at sharing her perceptions in view of her own experience of life’s stressors (Power 1975: 13-14).

Generally, women and girls were not encouraged to share their experiences of even medical illness. It was stated in the Prologue to *The Diseases of Women* written by Trotula of Salerno, during the late Middle Ages that women ‘dare not reveal the difficulties of their sickness to a male doctor’. Since, women were not allowed to qualify as doctors, this meant that females remained without anyone to talk to about their health problems, unless they consulted illegal
female medical practitioners such as the 14 century (Jacoba) Jacqueline Felicie de Almania of Paris (Amt 1993: 99, 111).

Medieval women and girls were not encouraged to develop particular gifts or talents. Female roles involved being a wife, mother or a nun. These roles all included some sort of labour, be it domestic, agricultural or trade. Moreover, although girls and women were expected to learn and know about family medicine, they were not allowed to practise as or be trained as practitioners (Power 1975: 88; Amt 1993: 108 - 112).

Girls and women were usually valued for their financial worth during the Middle Ages. A female heiress was viewed in terms of her property from an early age when marriages were arranged. Marriage was a business contract and the dowry system reigned supreme (Power 1975: 38, 41). In fact a girl would not have found a husband ‘ unless she had a sizeable dowry’ that could consist of valuable items including livestock, land, clothes, medicine, and money depending on the girl’s or women’s social rank, although poor girls had little chance of finding a husband, owing to their minimal dowries. In fact, dowries determined success in finding husbands, especially during the 12th Century when the population consisted of 15% more women than men and meant that the former competed for partners (Donnelly 2000: 1).

4.2.3.7 Multiple roles

Medieval working class women and girls had to practice more than one craft such as spinning, brewing, weaving, looking after livestock, in addition to home-making and sharing male tasks, that included work in the fields (Power 1975: 62 -66). Strenuous hours of working at so many tasks must have been also physically and emotionally stressful for female labourers especially since they experienced negative appraisal of their roles (Power 1975: 68-71; 75; Eve Vs Mary 2000: 1).

4.2.3.8 Lack of freedom of movement and social mobility

Another possible cause of stress for female participants in the primary and secondary educational milieus of the Middle Ages was their isolation from the world beyond their homes. For although girls of all social classes wandered around freely from the ages of about three to twelve years old, they were restricted thereafter until they were married, to safeguard their virginity. They were not allowed to leave their homes unaccompanied or hold any private conversations. These limitations were not entirely removed upon marriage, although married women were allowed to take part in religious gatherings, including pilgrimages and certain
exclusively female meeting places such as at the town well or mill (Weber 2001: 1; Power 1975: 10).

4.2.3.9 Intellectual and moral frustration in nuns

A stressor for religious females in particular was the moral and cognitive deterioration in nunneries. During the late Middle Ages, less emphasis was placed on intellectual pursuits and ‘learning was on the wane’. Immoral behaviour and slackness in religious duties was rife in religious institutions, and those in charge did little to censor the licentious and negligent conduct. ‘Frivolity and worldliness’ predominated, as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* portrait of Madame Eglentyne reveals (Power 1975: 96-99).

Since scholarship and virtue were still highly valued monastic principles, their absence must have been a cause of frustration and stress in female religious life. Moreover, moral and intellectual laxity may have lead to a low self-concept in nuns who had aspired to greater spiritual and intellectual heights on entering the religious life having given up natural and traditional family life. Original motivation may have been lost and replaced by a sense of tedium due to a spiritually uninspired and routine religious life. Purposeless life in a nunnery even extended to manual labour, which was mostly done by servants in the late Middle Ages (Reynolds 2000b; Power 1975: 97).

4.3 MANIFESTATIONS OF STRESS IN THE FEMALE PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEDIEVAL PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL MILIEUS

There were time-bound reasons for stress in medieval females participants in the primary and secondary educational milieus. Moreover, they probably manifested symptoms of stress because of the eternally present vulnerability factors of negatively perceived female biopsychosocial identity as society’s nurturers of the old and young that transformed itself into total denial of this role as in the case of female religious life.

The following paragraphs describe the negative stress response of the female participants of the medieval primary and secondary educational milieus who experienced negative stress response. The fact that the concept or term *stress* was used during the Middle Ages suggests the prevalence of the so-called ‘twentieth century disease’ even at that time. Evidence also reveals various physical as well as emotional and behavioural symptoms of stress such as: anxiety; tearfulness; withdrawal; feelings of emptiness or alienation; mood swings; addictive behaviour; excessive emotional reaction and feelings of guilt.
4.3.1 Physical manifestations

Descriptions of physical conditions, which appear to be linked to emotional states, seem to abound in records pertaining to female participants in the primary and secondary educational milieux during the Middle Ages. For example, evidence exists of the stress felt by girls about to enter marriage. Amt (1993: 139) describes the anguish of Christina of Markyate, who in the twelfth century was so determined not to take part in the wedding her parents had arranged for her, that she developed a fever. The stressor of marriage, which had negative connotations for girls and women during the Middle Ages, took its toll on this particular individual.

Smith (2000d: 1) speaks of other examples of ‘psychosomatic manipulation’ in medieval females, such as ‘trances, seizures and ecstatic nosebleeds’. In fact, Smith maintains that these physical manifestations of affective conditions, which ‘occurred almost exclusively in women’, were often given a spiritual and religious significance to what may have well been an indication of stress in female members of religious orders who were particularly under stress because of the total suppression of their natural femininity. Anorexia nervosa may have been evident in female individuals of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, who refused to eat ‘anything except the eucharistic host’ (Smith 2001d: 1). Bodily discharge of blood from stigmata and milk from breasts, as well as ‘recurrent pain’ and phantom pregnancies were considered particularly female religious phenomena during the Middle Ages. Sanctity was usually conferred upon those women and girls who suffered physically and mentally between 1000 and 1700. Moreover, females like Julian of Norwich welcomed suffering as a gift from God (Smith 2001d: 1; Denlinger 2001a: 1)

Fainting, loss of appetite and insomnia because of extreme anxiety, were other physical manifestations evidenced during the Middle Ages. Guibert de Nogent described his mother’s ‘despairing anxiety at the time of her husband’s missing in the war against the Normans’. He claimed that she refused to eat, drink and sleep owing to her distress. She also became hysterically paralysed:

In the dead of that night, as, full of deep anxiety, she lay in her bed, since it is the habit of the Devil to invade souls weakened with grief, suddenly whilst she lay awake, the Enemy himself rushed upon her and by the burden of his oppression almost crushed the life out of her. As she choked in agony of spirit and lost all use of her limbs.

(Amt 1993: 146-147)
De Nogent wrote of his mother’s anxiety later on in her life as well, due to widowhood, which she exacerbated by continually wearing a haircloth, as a self inflicted manifestation of stress beneath her garments (Amt 1993: 148-149).

According to the Prologue to *The Diseases of Women* attributed to Trotula of Salerno, who lived sometime between the mid-eleventh and the early thirteenth century, women had various menstrual problems, which may have been due to stress. Trotula not only speaks of cessation of menstruation for ‘biological’ reasons, she also says that ‘periods fail because of excessive grief or anger or excitement or fear (Amt 1993: 100). Trotula also mentions excessive flow of menses due to stress in Chapter 111 of her work (Amt 1993: 101).

### 4.3.2 Anxiety

Gibert de Nogent, in describing his mother’s stress, when she left her son of twelve to enter a nunnery, refers to her ‘intolerable anguish to her lacerated heart stung with the bitter remembrance of what she had left behind’ (Amt 1993: 149). In addition, De Nogent writes of his mother’s ‘being grieved to the heart ... troubled, agitated and weeping with sorrow as a result of her son’s being severely beaten by his master as a child (Amt 1993: 144).

Apprehension and uneasiness feature in letters written by Margaret Paston, a member of the gentry, during the 15th century (in Amt 1993: 171). In a personal letter, Paston states:

> I had never so heavy a season as I had from the time that I learned of your sickness till I learned of your amending, and yet mine heart is in no great ease, nor shall be til I know that ye be very whole.  

(in Amt 1993: 172)

An anonymous fifteenth century poem not well known declares the sorrow of the female situation during the Middle Ages:

> A woman is a worthy thyng  
> They do the washe and do the wrynge  
> Lullay, Lullay, she dothe the synge  
> And yet she has but care and woo  
> A womane is a worthy wyght  
> She serveth a man both daye and nyght,  
> Thereto she puttyth all her myght,
And yet she hathe but care and woo.

(Power 1975: 31)

Dhuoda (841-843) a noblewoman, who led a ‘rather sad’ life, wrote a *Manual for Her Son* (Amt 1993: 123-124). This medieval lady wrote of her ‘great fear and grief about what the future may bring me’ and mentions being ‘oppressed by the troubles of this world’ (Amt 1993: 126-127). *Holy Maidenhood: A Debate on Marriage* (13th century) delineates the anxiety and stress of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood in its attempt to convince young women to become nuns:

How many miseries …The anxiety about the throes of thy torment depriveth thee of the night’s sleep…After all this there cometh from the child … so many unhappy moments …and that thou must ever have an anxiety in looking for the time when the child will perish, and bring on his mother sorrow upon sorrow.

(Amt 1993: 94).

Being frequently prone to weeping may be a symptom of stress disorders and anxiety. Tearfulness may have been a frequent phenomenon amongst women and girls during the Middle Ages. Chaucer’s Wife of Bath in the *Canterbury Tales* remarks that God’s gifts to women are ‘deceit, weeping and spinning’ (Power 1975: 66-67).

### 4.3.3 Emotional alienation

The reclusive female religious orders, such as the Béguiines, may have been a collective manifestation of women’s distress as they withdrew from society and retreated into a hermit life-style as a maladaptive way of coping with the stressors life (Power 1975: 30)

The fifteenth century Saxon reformer Busch in his *Book of the Reformation of Monasteries* (1470) relates the feelings of emptiness and alienation of the dying Duchess of Brunswick. She reflects on her life as a female participant in the medieval primary and secondary educational milieu:

I have lived here in this castle like an anchoress in a cell. What delights or pleasures have I enjoyed here, save that I have made shift to show a happy face to my servants and gentlewomen? I have a hard husband (as you know) who has scarce any care or inclination towards women.

(Power 1975: 36)
The fourteenth century Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio writes of emotional shutdown due to stress in individuals facing the horrific effects of the medieval plague. In *Decameron*, Boccaccio describes how hearts were hardened from the pressure of appalling disease:

> calamity had instilled such horror into the hearts of men and women that brother abandoned brother, uncles, sisters and wives left their dear ones to perish, and what is more serious and almost incredible, parents avoided visiting or nursing their own children, as though these were not their own flesh.

(Amt 1993: 117)

The researcher believes that female emotional numbness appears particularly inconstant with the innate female nurturing self and the internal conflict must have caused great stress.

### 4.3.4 Suicide

Simeon of Durham, England (11 – 12th century) in describing the issue of gender segregation in churches mentions suicidal tendencies due to stress experienced by a woman who broke the rules. After walking on church ground normally restricted from females, the woman:

> … was seized with some kind of indefinite horror, and cried out that she was gradually losing her senses … she immediately fell down; …she that very night ended her life

Another Simeon narrative tells of a wife, who ‘was deprived of her reason …bit out her own tongue …in her madness she ended her own life by cutting her throat with her own hand’

Simeon speaks of fear of ‘punishment from heaven’ for transgressions as the reason for stress disorders in these suicidal women (Amt 1993: 233).

### 4.3.5 Mood swings

Evidence of mood and personality change is revealed in the medieval philosophy of humors, which resembled that of the Greeks and Romans. The body was viewed as a consisting of four humors, directly related to the four elements: yellow bile (fire); phlegm (water); black bile (earth); blood (air). Excess in any humor was thought to cause a mood swing. For example, too much black bile could create melancholy (*Health* 2000: 1).
The twelfth century medieval troubadour poet, Bernart de Ventadorn, wrote of excessive female feelings as a result of being in love (Bernart de Ventadorn 2001: 1). The lady in question states:

Gui d'Ussel, because of you I'm quite distraught …

(Gui 2000: 1)

Another twelfth century troubadour, this time one of several female ones, Dame Castelleza, also speaks of emotional distress due to amorous feelings. Often referred to as the dark lady of medieval song, Castelleza’s songs reveal a profound despondency:

Whatever joy may come to me from love,
from now on I don't care to rejoice

(Dame Castelloza 2001: 1)

4.3.6 Addictive behaviour

Medieval nuns may have displayed addictions in what may have been an attempt to dull possible pain and distress experienced in religious life. Eudes, the archbishop of Rouen during the 13th century observed such behaviour in nunnery. He reported excessive drinking of wine, sexual promiscuity, obsession with elaborate clothing and over-eating (Amt 1993: 245-249; Northrup 1998:3-24).

4.3.7 Feelings of guilt

Feelings of culpability and empathy with the weight of the biblical Eve’s wrongdoing are evident in an anonymous tenth century Irish poem. Walker (2000: 1) wonders if the lady who wrote the poem ‘was punished of some horrendous crime’. Her extreme stress, as well as that of womankind in general as she perceives it, is evident in the following words:

I have sinned; I should be stretched upon the tree ... As long as women live in sunlight, they shall not escape Your wrath. There would be no ice glazing ground. There would be no glistening windswept winter. There would be no hell; there would be no sorrow. There would be no fear, were it not for me.

(Walker 2000: 1)
4.4. COPING MECHANISMS

Stress may have caused physical, emotional and behavioural disorders on the part of female participants in the medieval primary and secondary educational milieus. Therefore, women and girls during the Middle Ages may have used various means of coping with stress to reduce feelings of tensions, pressure and strain.

Contemporary theories of transgenerational psychotherapy originated by the French psychologist, Anne Ancelin Schutztenberger (1919 - ) suggest that we inherit stress from previous generations who bequeath us their ‘hang-ups’, unresolved issues and tensions that have been denied and suppressed instead of dealt with openly (Antecessor 2001: 1). One could take that theory further and suggest that generations of females also pass down coping skills albeit some maladaptive ones. On the other hand, female diathesis to stress may have also been passed down from generation to generation. For, research has shown that we not only inherit our parents genes and biology but also their sociopsychobiological make-up that is transmitted both consciously and unconsciously via nature and nurture (Patel 1991: 13; Antecessor 2001: 1; Northrup 1998: 712). Nevertheless, by finding a measure of personal independence, using contraceptives and doing physical exercise, medieval females may have raised their tolerance to stress. Likewise an awareness of society’s veneration of Virgin Mary as well as the status of the lady of the manor may have helped women and girls handle stressors albeit maladaptively. Being partners in certain processes, praise of femininity in literature, a more positive personal (female) attitude to marriage, the female position in nunneries and knighthood orders, certain religious as well as secular rites and recreational activities including physical exercise and artistic or musical endeavours may have also provided effective stress control. These coping strategies are explained and referenced in the following paragraphs.

4.4.1 Discovering personal independence

Medieval females found self-esteem via legal, economical and emotional autonomy in widowhood if they did not have to revert to the custody of elder male relatives, which was often the case. Moreover, some widows were allowed control of their children in addition to material property (Amt 1993: 130; Johnson 2000c: 1).

The other situation, which allowed for independence (spiritual and emotional) was when virgins ‘defined themselves as individuals before God, not just as daughters or wives’ and then devoted themselves to a religious life (Hallissy 1993: 8).
4.4.2 Contraception

Medieval women practised and girls learnt about contraception. This was in spite of the fact that the Church forbade it (Amt 1993: 82). Ancient Greek and Roman writers and physicians, including Aristotle, Lucretius, Pliny, Dioscorides and Soranus often provided information to medieval females on various methods. Popular forms of contraception were *coitus interruptus*, and abstinence. Other methods were used such as the insertion of substances and objects into the vagina such as sponges and ‘wool plugs saturated with a gummy substance or with astringent solutions to contract the uterine opening’. Condoms made of goats bladders, learnt from Ancient Romans were also used. Then there were mixtures and rituals advocated by witches, which included animal excrement and fluids. Medieval females were acutely aware of the need to prevent pregnancy ‘not only to save or preserve their existing families, but also to exert some kind of control over their bodies and over their lives as a whole’ (Carper 2000c: 1).

4.4.3 Stress relief in physical exercise

Contemporary health experts maintain that regular physical exercise increases resistance to stress (Roche Barocca 2001: 1). In ancient times, Spartan girls received rigorous physical training, which appeared to turn them into healthy and strong adult women. Records reveal that medieval females were likewise involved in sports. Manuscript illustrations and church sculptures show images of females playing sport during the Middle Ages. They were involved in sporting activities that had them throwing, jumping, riding, playing ball games, shooting arrows and even wielding swords (Smith 2001f: 1; Nichols 2003: 1).

In *The Diseases of Women* attributed to Trotula of Salerno, massage and coitus are suggested for menstrual problems (Amt 1993: 100, 103). This would have helped the stress and tension due to the awkwardness and possible pain of menstruation.

4.4.4 Sense of female pride in the form of role models

In a world where girls and women did not set their sights on personal individual goals and ambitions, the cult of the Virgin Mary, fully developed by the 11th century, may have allowed some feelings of pride and hope in being female, albeit a sexually suppressed one. The Church’s exaltation, veneration and adulation of the sexually uncorrupted mother of Jesus Christ may have indirectly restored sense of feminine power and pride in medieval females,
who were, generally, not granted the status and esteem granted to males. Being a daughter, wife, mother or female religious was often the only status for a medieval female and being a nun was the most esteemed in a Church controlled society (Power 1975: 10).

Since a lack of self-esteem is considered a cause of distress and even depression by contemporary researchers, the medieval cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary would have provided a panacea against, as well as an active means for dissipating stress. Stress relief would have included pilgrimages to shrines; prayer rituals; special chapels; images, icons and symbolic flowers; miracle plays and particular feast days, including Saturday, which was a special veneration of the ‘divine mother of divine child’ (Solomon 2001:1; Power 1975: 19-20; Miller 2002a: 1; Amt 1993: 217).

The cult of chivalry, developed in the 12th and 13th century elevated the image of aristocratic women, as did medieval devotion to the Virgin Mary. Reverence of the lady of the manor, not in terms of womanhood but courtly love found particular expression in the troubadour songs of 14th century France, Germany and Italy (Power 1975: 10, 14). Illicit love affairs were socially unacceptable, so this veneration of a particular female role was not always credible. Nevertheless, the lady was revered in (extra-marital) courtly love, where the male lover was considered a humble servant to his lady. This was in sharp contrast to the medieval (arranged) marital relationship where women were subservient partners. Thus, even if the lady of the manor was bored, lonely and restricted to the domestic realm, the romantic and idealized image of femininity in romantic art and literature may have superficially counteracted stressful feelings of inferiority in girls and women during the Middle Ages. That was until the rise of the middle class brought its own image stories (fabliaux in France) of nagging and despicable women that totally undermined femaleness (Power 1975: 11, 20-28, 35, 36; Kleinbach 2001b: 1).

Knowledge of women who were respected members of society may have provided hope and self-esteem in women and girls who were not perceived as equal to men and boys in a patriarchal society. For example, Hildegard of Bingen was a learned author and respected mystic, who ‘wrote songs, mystical, moral and scientific writings and corresponded with powerful churchmen and secular leaders’ (Amt 1993: 233). Clare of Assisi (1193 – 1253), the spiritual sister and follower of the radical preacher Francis of Assisi was also an esteemed leader of a community of religious women. The rule Clare wrote for her convent was the first religious rule written by a woman (Amt 1993: 235).

Membership of a military female knighthood order such as the Order of the Hatchet, started in Catalonia in 1149 by Raymond Berenger, Count of Barcelona, to ‘honour the women who
fought for the defense of the town of Tortosa against a Moor attack’ may have improved self-esteem for those elected to join this male world (Velde 2002: 1).

In England, 68 women of regal birth, wives and consorts of knights were ‘appointed to the Garter Order of Knights between 1358 and 1488 (Velde 2002: 1). By being able to thus think positively about themselves, women and girls may have been able to control stress (Louw & Edwards 1993: 611).

4.4.5 Self respect as a marital partner

Although the female gender in general was considered inferior and denigrated by medieval males, peasant women and girls were relied upon and needed by their male counterparts (Power 1975: 34). Christine de Pisan, who often wrote about female abuse at the hands of males, regarded peasant women as having ‘greater sufficiency, than some that be of high estate’. Self-respect may have, therefore, been more of a reality and guarantee against stress for peasant females than those in the nobility despite the myth of the courtly lady (Power 1975: 76).

According to Amt (1993: 177), ‘medieval women played a vital role in the urban as well as the agrarian economy’. As with peasant women and girls, female workers were much needed co-workers in town projects and were, thus, respected. Amt also maintains that some women were accorded the status of femme sole, a woman who was perceived as independent for commercial reasons regardless of her marital status (Amt 1993: 177; Power1975: 10; 59-60).

Self-esteem in females whose men were at court or at war in distant countries may have also been a buffer against stress (Amt 1993: 164). Men trusted these women to run and defend the manor in their absence. (Power 1975: 45; Amt 1993: 119)

4.4.6 Knowledge of literary praise of females

Medieval writers did not only proffer misogynist descriptions of female behaviour. Some poems and prose reveal understanding and support of the feminine position during the Middle Ages. Chaucer’s works provide examples of this empathy, as does the The Nut Brown Maide written in medieval England (Power 1975: 30). Christine de Pisan’s prose works La Cité des Dames and Le Livre des Trois Vertus discuss the quality of female roles in different levels of society. Moreover, her poems Lepistre and Dieu Damour deal with female abuse (Power 1975: 31-33). Le Menagier de Paris, written by a 15th century middle class townsman for his 15 year
old wife reveals a positive perception of middle class wives and their ability to fulfil an important role in life (Power 1975: 50-52).

Literature that avoided painting females in a negative light would have provided encouragement to medieval girls and women, who may have been emotionally crushed by misogynistic images often painted in song and elsewhere (Louw & Edwards 1993: 712).

4.4.7 Attainment of female literacy

Some upper class girls would have learnt to read and write during the Middle Ages, either in convent schools or when serving the households of great ladies. Middle class girls may have acquired literacy via their craftsmen training in towns. Poorer girls in the town and country may have acquired some elementary schooling (Power 1975: 80).

French literature of the 12th to 13th centuries speaks of female literacy, and records of the 13th to 15th centuries in Germany give evidence of schools in towns. Evidence is scant for England, but there is evidence of formal literacy training during the 15th to 16th century that may have led to self esteem and coping skills (Power 1975: 80 –81, 73-85, 89).

The vast collection of letters that Margery Paston wrote during the fifteenth century reveal outpourings of emotion from a literate woman to her husband, John Paston III. This expression of feeling may have been another means of finding rest from stress available to medieval women of letters who could write of physical and emotional manifestations of stress as Marjorie Paston did in 1477 as follows:

I am not in good heele of body ner of herte … For ther wottys no creature what peyn that I endure, And for to be deede I dare it not dyscure my moder hath labored the mater to my fadure full delygently, but sche can no more

.................. (Paston Family 2001: 1)

4.4.8 Knowledge of medicine

Access to medical knowledge was available to girls and women who were given the responsibility of family medicine and, therefore, a sense of control in their lives. Moreover, treatises on diseases of women were especially written for their use, as shown in a translator’s preface to the 14th century English version of a treatise entitled Diseases of Women attributed to
Trotula of Salerno, who lived sometime between the eleventh and the thirteenth century (Amt 1993:112). Furthermore, midwives and other females provided the health care of girls and women, especially gynecological treatment, even though females were not allowed to officially practice medicine (Power 1975: 86; Amt 1993:112).

Medieval women and girls faced with the stressor of childbirth might have found relief from anxiety in reading or having read to them advice regarding childbirth. These were written with the intention of providing information to literate females childbirth. These women could then share their newly acquired information with females who could not read (Carper 2000b: 1).

4.4.9 Rituals

Medieval girls and women may have been helped to face the ordeals of life in special rituals, prayers, liturgies, blessings and services such as those performed especially for pregnant women and new mothers (Amt 1993: 97–98).

Even the marriage ceremony may have prepared and consoled girls and women who viewed marriage with apprehension. It was a carefully arranged ritual comprising ‘negotiations between the families, betrothal, the posting of bans, a marriage ceremony in front of the church door … (and) the nuptial mass’ (Divver 2000: 1). These rituals may have helped with stress due to early marriage as well (Shahar 1990: 85-88).

Fasting for spiritual purposes may have been another way medieval females had of coping with the stressors that faced them by providing a means of being in control of their lives, bodies and food, in particular. Abstention from food, whether this meant the exclusion of meat or a reduction in quantity of food eaten plus an addition of unpalatable items to food, was seen as a form of ‘dedication to God’ and disciplining of the body to strengthen the spirit (Willis 2000: 1). Religious girls and women during the Middle Ages compensated for their lack of control in an otherwise patriarchal life with this form of ‘holy anorexia’. In the same way, female religious mutilated their bodies by wearing hair shirts, tying themselves up with twisted ropes, rubbing lice into self-inflicted wounds, depriving themselves of sleep, praying barefoot and piercing breasts with nettles (Weaver 2000b: 1; Bell 1985: 23).

Celebrations celebrating femininity such as the May Day Festival may have temporarily lifted the spirits of girls becoming women and the women who helped them grow up. May Day was a spring and fertility celebrations that originated in a Roman celebration called Floralia (Arnold 2000b: 1). According to Smith (2001f: 1) ‘numerous parades and pageants punctuated London's
yearly calendar’. Even a typical medieval feast ‘was a glorious celebration of many parts’ consisting of special singing, order of ceremonies, role-playing and courses of food (Arnold 2000a: 1).

4.4.10 Recreational activities

Hanawalt in Smith (2001f: 1) describes girls of twelfth century London ‘playing tag and ball, running races, and imitating adult ceremonies like marriage. Unlike boys who played cruel and destructive games including cockfights and bird hunts, girls took part in gentler activities. Girls of the nobility learnt to play music, do embroidery, sing, dance and enjoy literature (Smith 2001f: 1).

According to Smith (2001b: 1), lullabies were another activity that helped females express and cope with pent up feelings of pressure during the Middle Ages. Medieval lullabies sung to peasant children in particular sang of the harshness of life’s stressors. In the words of Hanawalt (1986: 179), many medieval lullabies ‘integrated’ mother and child into ‘the common worries of survival of both individual and family’, as well as telling the child to be thankful for its mother’s care, as the following example shows:

Child, thou art nart a pilgrim byt and uncouth gest
Child, if bitide thou shalt thrive and thee [prosper],
Think thou was a-fostred upon thy modres knee …
Ever have synde in thyn hetre of tho thynges three--

(Hanawalt 1986: 179)

Medieval girls and women may have found rest from stress and a sense of safety in performing socially sanctioned daily rituals, which abounded in the Middle Ages (Furnivall 1969: 133-137). There were books written on manners such as The Boke of Curtasye, which was written in the middle of the fifteenth century. Such books stipulated rules and regulations regarding, meals, remedies, resting, working, personal hygiene cleanliness routines and even rituals prior to retiring to bed such as how to remove garments (Carper 2000b: 1). The Boke of Curtasye even mentions stress relief by stating:

Put off your cares with your clothes, and take them up again in the morning.

(Furnivall 1969: 358)
Female participants in the primary and secondary educational milieus of the Middle Ages may have found stress relief in art. According to Arnold and Divver (2000: 1) nuns did artistic work, which was often inspired by visions. The German nun, Gudya, of the Weissfauen Convent in the twelfth century wrote and illuminated a manuscript, *Homiliary of Saint Bartholomew* (Harksen 1975: 46). Another example of a female artist was Claricia, not a nun, but who decorated Psalters and other documents in a twelfth century convent scriatorium in Germany (Peterson & Wilson 1976: 11; Heller 1991: 12). Ende, an artist of the Middle Ages was a Spanish nun in the tenth century who illustrated a Spanish Romanesque manuscript called *Beautus Apocalypse of Gerona* (Peterson & Wilson 1976 13). Caricia and Guda included self-portraits in their work, which may have helped with self-esteem problems. Sabina of Steinbach, a stonemason in the early fourteenth century, who made statues for the Strasbourg Cathedral, may have helped herself and others who shared her work find relief from stress. Her statue of St. John holds a scroll that reads Gratia divinae pietatis adesto savinae de petra dura per quam sum facta figura which means Thanks be to the holy piety of this woman, Sabina, who formed me from this hard stone (Peterson & Wilson 1976: 20).

There are many more examples of female artists such as: Diemund, a nun at Wessobrun (1057 – 1130) who produced 45 manuscripts (Peterson & Wilson: 1976 13); Margarete, a Beguine who made her living as an artist and scribe; Clara Hatzerlin, who decorated a collection of German folk-songs called *Volkslieder* (Harksen: 1975 46); the Abbess of Regensburg who illuminated the *Gospel Book*, an important manuscript of the Middle Ages (Peterson & Wilson: 1976 15) and others who inspired artwork by their visions but who did not do the art work. In particular the visions of Hildegard von Bingen were illustrated by the nuns of her convent (Peterson & Wilson 1976: 15-16). Tapestries were a common artistic expression for women and girls, whether inspired by visions or other subjects and ‘individual or collaborative work’ (Peterson & Wilson 1976: 17; Harksen 1975: 47). Perhaps Queen Mathilda created Bayeux Tapestry with her court ladies while William was off conquering England as a means of conquering their anxiety (Peterson & Wilson: 1976: 17).

Women were also central to certain artistic imagery, which may have comforted females under stress. For example, the *pieta*, which is a ‘representation of the Virgin Mary holding the dead Jesus Christ on her lap’, first inspired by a visionary German nun, ‘became a widely used art form’ (Arnold & Divyer 2000: 1).
4.4.12 Religious visions

Although manifestations of stress, visions, trances and self-abuse typical of female mystics of the Middle Ages could be perceived as a coping mechanism in the lives of these women and girls. Such behaviour may have been a way of gaining control of their lives (and bodies), often denied to them by society and their family. Medieval mystics like Catherine of Siena, Christina of Markyate, and Elisabeth of Schonau experienced ecstasy, visions, trances and masochism.

According to Cazelles (1991: 37) for female mystics, visions ‘frequently involved sensorial perceptions such as tasting and eating’ as well as being visual’.

Bynum (1987: 234) describes visionaries’ self-inflicted physical abuse for the sake of others. Some women, including Catherine of Siena, starved themselves (some only eating the Eucharist) and gave their food to others ‘as the most painful renunciation’ (Bynum 1987: 2; 168). Catherine ‘attempted to retrieve’ food once eaten ‘by using sticks to try to fish the food out of her throat’ (Bynum 1987: 168).

Fasting often led to ‘states of frenzy or trance’. In the case of Catherine of Siena, it resulted in ‘restless energy and sleeplessness’ (Bynum 1987: 167). Other physical states such as ‘fainting fits, paralysis, or nosebleeds’ accompanied the trance (Bynum 1987: 231). Christina of Markyate and Catherine of Siena physically abused themselves in other ways such as hours of prayer and ‘flagellation daily’ (Petroff 1986: 239). Catherine of Siena attempted to show ‘strength of will also by drinking the pus from dying women’s breasts’, ‘scalding herself, cutting off her hair, and refusing to sleep or eat’ (Bynum 1987: 172).

According to Denlinger (2001b: 1), the visions of female mystics ‘helped them to come to terms with stressful events in their lives’. For example Christina of Markyate envisioned ‘escape from her family’s home’ (Petroff 1986: 144-145). The vision comforted Christina and helped her ‘to actually proceed with her plan’. Denlinger (2001b: 1) maintains that medieval female mystics appeared to ‘gain power by suffering … overcome adversity and gain self-confidence’.

Visionaries such as Catherine of Sienna may have found an outlet via mystical experience to deal with unresolved feelings such as anxiety and guilt. Her twin sister had died at birth and she had lost twelve other siblings. It is indeed possible that St Catherine had lived with a feeling of stress since a small child at being allowed to escape the death that befell her brothers and sisters, especially the child created in her mirror image. The post-modern French psychoanalyst, Francoise Dolto recognised the child from his or her earliest years as result of his or her unconscious inclinations and needs (Liaudet 1998: 1-216). Moreover, St Catherine (1347-
1380) who experienced her first vision at the age of six spent her early years and, most probably the rest of her life, in the dismal aftermath of the plague of 1348, which claimed 80,000 members of the population of Siena, a town which probably ‘never got over’ this disaster. Perhaps, she also felt guilt at surviving instead of all those bodies that lay beneath mounds of earth in her hometown (Turkle 1995: 4)

### 4.4.14 Music and dance

Music is a relaxation technique that helps with stress management (Louw & Edwards 1993: 670). Furthermore, women and girls were involved with medieval music although evidence of performances is scant. Yet, the nun, Egeria (ca. 400) wrote about the musical details of various religious services in which both men and female laity took part (Bernard 1971: 47).

Manuscripts survive from nunnery libraries in medieval Germany and Switzerland. Some sources also indicate female roles within liturgical dramas performed at the convents. Moreover, the surviving musical sources indicate that monastic women had active liturgical roles, whilst other nuns would have sung all of the major musical items (Yardley 1986: 15-38).

Evidence suggests that women read and copied music scriptoria. Some musical sources were signed by women, such as Sister Lukardis of Utrecht from the fifteenth century, as described by a Dominican friar:

> She busied herself with ...writing, which she had truly mastered as we may see in the large, beautiful, useful choir books which she wrote and annotated for the convent.

(Edwards 1991: 10)

Hildegard of Bingen is but one illustrious example of a female composer of 77 musical pieces in the *Symphonia Harmoniae Caelestium Revelationum* (Newman 1988: 24; Cyrus 2000: 1).

Women also composed secular music, and twenty-one women troubadours are known by name. Furthermore, women and girls performed secular music as, for example, *menestrelles* and *jongleuresses* (old French terms for lady minstrels). Females were allowed to be members of the *Guild of Minstrels* in Paris from 1321 to the seventeenth century (Cyrus 2000: 1). Boccaccio's Decameron identifies women and girls singing and dancing, along with their male companions, as do many of the courtly romances of the twelfth and thirteenth-centuries (Page 1989: 102-106; Page 1982: 441-450).
Dancing was popular in community festivals and as private entertainment during the European Middle Ages, although the Church, which dominated the era, disapproved of it. Peasant and folk dances were adapted by the aristocracy as courtly social events for males and females (Dance 1994:3).

### 4.5 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher noted some manifestations of stress in medieval women and girls. These included physical and behavioural manifestations such as suicide and addictive behaviour (paragraphs 4.3.1, 4.4.4, 4.3.6). The researcher described a few emotional manifestations for example, anxiety, emotional alienation, mood swings and guilt (Cf. paragraphs 4.3.2, 4.3.3, 4.3.5, 4.3.7).

Medieval female participants in the primary and secondary educational milieus may have resembled their prehistoric and ancient world ancestors in finding ways of dealing with the stressors that they had to confront in the course of their lives. They also attempted to perceive female identity in a positive light, although their efforts were more contrived and unnatural perhaps. For example, suffering and oppression was welcomed and received a positive cognitive appraisal. Veneration of suffering saints including the Virgin Mary and religious visions that included self-abuse became coping mechanisms, although some may have been maladaptive. The Christian virtue of patience and acceptance of God’s Will would have played a role here. However, glorifying negative perceptions of femininity as in the veneration of Virgin Mary and courtly lady lovers may have actually deepened negative female self-esteem (Cf. paragraphs 4.4.4, 4.4.12). A positive perception of femininity was gained through discovering personal independence, female role models such as lady knights, self-respect as a marital partner, knowledge of literary praise of females and attainment of literacy (Cf. paragraphs, 4.4.1, 4.4.4, 4.4.5, 4.4.6, 4.4.7). Practical and hands-on measures to reduce stress were also popular such as contraception, physical exercise, a practical knowledge of medicine, as well as rituals and recreational activities (Cf. paragraphs 4.4.2, 4.4.3, 4.4.8, 4.4.9, 4.4.10). Creative pastimes such as art, music and dance may have also provided stress relief (Cf. paragraphs 4.4.11, 4.4.13).

As was the case with women and girls in antiquity, maladaptive coping techniques may have been an extreme stress response to the dismal life of many medieval females. Firstly, a negative attitude to females underpinned many of the stressors that faced them as it did their ancestors. They were considered socially, legally and spiritually inferior to males and not worthy of the
same education as males (4.2.1.3, 4.2.1.4, 4.2.1.5, 4.2.2.5). Moreover, despite their second-
class status, severe pressures were place on females during the dark ages during times of war
and disease and regarding duties as healers, nurturers, homemakers and members of female
religious orders (Cf. paragraphs 4.2.1.1, 4.2.1.2, 4.2.2.1, 4.2.2.2, 4.2.2.6). Yet, they were often
brutally treated as healers and persecuted as witches, as well as having to endure uncomfortable
domestic conditions, frustration in their maternal role and severely harsh punishment (Cf.
paragraphs 4.2.1.6, 4.2.2.3, 4.2.2.4, 4.2.2.7). It appears that females were under great duress
because of their natural and nurtured female biological, psychological and social identity as
nurturers in society and the family. This was also particularly evident at micro-level in the
medieval female self that had to often undergo sexual physical mutilation, gender-related
taboo's, stifling or bodily distorting clothing and sexual abuse in an epoch that undermined
natural sexuality and especially female sexuality (Cf. paragraphs 4.2.3.1, 4.2.3.2, 4.2.3.3,
4.2.3.4). In addition, medieval women and girls were cloistered not only in nunneries, but also
at a cognitive and emotional level with regard to adequate self-actualization. There was no
transitional period between girlhood and womanhood, females were not allowed to develop an
individual identity, they were expected to fulfil multiple and often conflicting roles, they lacked
freedom as individuals and were often frustrated in their intellectual and moral growth (Cf.
paragraphs 4.2.3.5, 4.2.3.6, 4.2.3.7, 4.2.3.8, 4.2.3.9).

Stress diathesis or vulnerability due to medieval female biological, psychological and social
vulnerability may have continued in later eras. However, coping strategies used by women and
girls during the Middle Ages may have also been used by future generations of females in
addition to some more modern ones. To understand the experience of stress in female
participants in the primary and secondary educational milieux of human history after the Middle
Ages, the researcher will examine the era (1750-1950) in the western world. The analysis in the
next chapter of this project will view what may indeed be an eternal problem of female stress in
a context that differed in many ways to that of medieval female experience.