When Sir Geoffrey’s daughter Jeanne turned sixteen, her behavior in social situations would become increasingly important. Her little sister Anne would feel the tension, too, even though the attention would have been on Jeanne. When an unmarried nobleman visited the Tour Landry family, Jeanne would have been fussed over by her maidservants, her ladies-in-waiting, and her mother until they deemed her clothing grand enough, her carriage stately enough, and her smile demure enough to make her marriageable. Anne would likely have looked on enviously, forgetting that envy was a deadly sin. As she watched, she would learn how she herself would be expected to act in a few short years. In her parents’ bedchamber, contentedly sucking at the wet nurse’s breast, baby Marie would be oblivious to the scene that awaited her when she grew up.

According to a modern myth about the Middle Ages, all girls at the age of twelve either married men three times their age or else were forced to become nuns. The only alternative was to dress as a boy and escape with a band of traveling minstrels. Whereas it’s true that girls of the nobility were often betrothed at a younger age than those of the merchant or peasant classes, generally only royalty and the very high nobility, concerned with alliances of land and wealth, married their children at improbable ages, sometimes as young as six or seven. Princess Margaret of Burgundy was eleven when she married the dauphin in 1404. In the following year, Christine de Pizan wrote for her *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, a companion book to *The Book of the Three Virtues*. Christine herself, a member of the aristocracy who spent much of her time at court, was fifteen when she married. Yet even the daughters of dukes were more likely to marry at twenty or twenty-five than at fifteen, and the idea of the medieval child bride has fortunately faded in the light of recent scholarship.
Similarly, notions about girls disguising themselves as boys are vastly overstated. One thirteenth-century French story, Silence, does feature a girl dressed as a boy who joins a band of minstrels, but her parents are the ones who come up with this ruse. They pretend she’s a boy so she can inherit their estate after a king declares that girls can’t do so. In the Middle Ages, as in Shakespeare’s plays, the girl disguised as a boy was a feature of fiction, rarely of fact.

Canon law, the law of the Church, decreed that girls could marry at twelve, boys at fourteen. Sometimes noble girls who married as children lived with their mothers-in-law, not with their husbands, for a few years until they were considered old enough to be wives. Sometimes a very young girl was betrothed to a man but not actually married to him until years later. But this applies mainly to the very highest rungs of the social ladder, those nearest the crown. When we lower our gaze to the merely aristocratic inhabitants of Sir Geoffrey’s country castle, we find that the average age of marriage for girls was seventeen. And in England in the following century, Katherine and Elizabeth Goodwyn, the daughters of the prosperous woolmerchant, would have married at nineteen or twenty. Their husbands would have been older, perhaps thirty, because they first needed to finish their apprenticeships and establish themselves as merchants. Other English women of the upper middle classes were at least twenty when they married, including Elizabeth Paston and Margery Kempe, and peasant girls were usually twenty or more, whereas their husbands would be two to four years older.

Yet from the time they became teenagers, both merchant class and aristocratic girls and their families would be thinking about marriage. And in thinking about marriage, they would be considering social deportment. In the first two stories in this chapter, Sir Geoffrey is apparently concerned simply with proper ways to behave in company. He shortly moves toward his real topic—the courtesy of courting. The word court appears in “courtesy” for good reason. Courteous behavior is courtly behavior, the manners that are appropriate for the court and that trickle down to provincial castles and manor houses. Etiquette is like fashion—it changes with the time and the place. Nevertheless the manners Sir Geoffrey advocates would have been current a hundred years later in England, when men such as Robert Goodwyn of London, Thomas Lane of Gloucester, and John Goodyere of Monken Hadley were buying William Caxton’s edition of The Book of the Knight of the Tower to discover ways to make themselves and their daughters welcome—if not at court, then at least in