Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Church's rites, ceremonies, and prayers celebrated and defined the central passages of the life cycle. From the christening of infants to their confirmation in youth, the marriage of consenting couples and the burial of the departed, these moments were defined and understood by Christian theology and interpreted by the Church's ministers (see Sacraments; Death and Dying). These practices were old, and their retention throughout the early modern period reflected the strength of continuity. But the religious changes that swept through England (see Context) brought significant changes to the rites attending the life cycle. Where the pre-Reformation church had surrounded the living with seven sacraments, the reformers reduced these to two: baptism and the eucharist. Marriage and last rites were stripped of their sacramental status. Only baptism remained a sacrament and in Protestant England, this rite, along with all the rest, was simplified, performed in the vernacular and pruned of the symbolic elements expelling the devil.

It is something of a paradox that at the same time that reformers desacralised key passages of the life cycle, the royal supremacy over the church and the requirement to keep parish registers resulted in the creation of historical records of christenings, marriages, and burials that are the bedrock of our understanding of the early modern life cycle.

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Marginal details of Death taking a Nurse and a Countrywoman, with verses on death.
Origin/Date: London || 1569
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