Married Life in the Middle Ages 900-1300

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Married Life in the Middle Ages offers a refreshing approach to medieval marriage. Elisabeth van Houts focuses on the social and emotional sides of marriage rather than viewing marriage through a legal or institutional lens. Two aspects of van Houts’ book set it apart from others. First, she uses a variety of sources, including charters, letters, narrative sources like saints’ lives and fiction, and material culture. Second, van Houts approaches medieval marriage comprehensively by populating her book with examples from all over medieval Europe, from an array of centuries and social classes.

The book is organised around four interrelated themes: 1. Tension between patriarchy and individual freedom of choice as to who to marry; 2. Married clergy’s search for “individual agency and self-determination” in their choice to marry as the call for clerical celibacy magnified; 3. How women helped to advocate for a “degree of gender equality and self-determination” in who they could marry and how they influenced married life and; 4. The place of emotions such as “love, hate, fear and fury” in the creation of a marriage and domestic life (p. 20). These themes allow van Houts to consider married life in interesting ways and to offer insights that have bearing not just on medieval marriage but the questions of choice, self-determination, and the inherent strain between the individual and community. To examine married life, the volume is broken down into three sections: Getting Married, Married Life, and Alternative Living, with the four themes set out in the introduction woven into each.

The first two chapters take the reader through the process of getting married in the Middle Ages. Chapter one investigates the “Making of Marriage,” which the author rightly points out was a series of events rather than a singular moment that included betrothal and courting. To stress the continuity across social strata, the practices of the landed elite, the urban elite, and rural classes are examined. Van Houts makes the case that it was family who directed the making of a marriage and not the clergy. She also argues that kings had a very limited impact on determining marriages—two points that argue against prominent historiographical strands. The author’s broad geographical and chronological focus is apparent in her treatment of elopement, where she examines cases from four different times and places. The themes of self-determination and agency in marriage are also raised. She identifies the late 11th and early 12th century as the watershed for this rise in individual self-assertion. The examples van Houts untangles show an increasing demand on the part of
young people to have some say in who they would marry.

Chapter two considers the wedding celebration itself. Clergy, van Houts finds, were as absent from the celebration of marriage as they were from the planning and arranging of marriages. She expertly interrogates sources like hagiography to come up with details about the ceremony among a variety of social classes. She also offers a new consideration of the life of Christina of Markyate. Van Houts finds Christina’s insistence that she consent to a proposed marriage evidence of both the growing trend of self-determination and women’s role in changing the norms concerning marriage and consent. The material culture of marriage is also pieced together from passing references in the sources. Rings, for instance, became part of the ceremony and were reused generation to generation, but also by men when they remarried. These objects were also gifts representing love and affection.

The material culture of married life is also highlighted in the next section on sex and love. Relying on both textual and archaeological evidence, van Houts charts new territory in her exploration of the intimate life of married couples. She finds that most elite couples had a private space for their bed. While literary sources describe the bed as belonging to the husband, van Houts relays the colorful account of Duke Richard of Normandy and his concubine-then-wife Gunnor arguing over their bed, to highlight that women could assert some control over the marital bed (and, by inference, the marital relationship). Sexual compatibility was part of a general emotional tie between husband and wife—one that often led to affection. Using examples of wives living apart from their husbands, ranging in time and place from the Carolingian Dhuoda to Humberga of Puiset who followed her husband on crusade, van Houts uncovers evidence of longing and affection. But this emotion was not confined to the women as she asserts “men dreaded leaving home as much as women dreaded the news of their husband’s disappearance or death in action.” (p. 115).

In the next chapter, “Authority and Collaboration,” van Houts tackles the issue of patriarchy. She accepts from the outset that medieval European society was deeply patriarchal. The author, however, refutes the assumption that this meant wives were inherently subordinate and argues for the presence of collaboration. Married couples needed to cooperate in running households and arranging marriages for their children. Recognising that women were subject to their husband’s authority—and providing a breadth of examples—van Houts also confronts the question of marital violence (pp. 131-133). Although her view of married life is far more positive than these examples of abuse would suggest, the author scrupulously views marriage from a variety of perspectives. The rest of the chapter presents what van Houts sees as dominant experience of husband and wife: the practical reality of collaboration and the need to share responsibilities. Examples are culled from sources like Erec et Énide to discuss aristocratic marriage, but also from royalty, as well as from urban husbands and wives, including Jewish couples. Indeed, the model of cooperation offered by Jewish spouses is posited to have influenced medieval clerics in their concern about the married life of Christians involved in trade and commerce (p. 137). Even though medieval society was patriarchal, van Houts shows that this did not prevent women from being influential or from being partners to their husbands. Rather, medieval husbands from all parts of society relied on their wives in a variety of ways. Given the emphasis placed on women’s voices, however, it is strange that the work of female authors—like Marie de France—are absent from this discussion. The argument would also have been enhanced by examples from more documents of practice, like charters.

Moving from married life to the termination of marriage, chapter five addresses how marriages ended and how/if people remarried. Discussion begins with an assessment of the frequency of remarriage in western Europe, with van Houts confirming that there was no general pattern for remarriage. In her analysis of remarriage, the author casts her net widely and considers the topic throughout the social classes and over the geographic span of western Europe. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she finds that gender did affect remarriage. The idea that widows should not remarry but remain chaste so that they could pray for their husbands’ souls—a practice reinforced by purgatory—meant that women were less likely to remarry. The author further comments that women in the northwest of Europe did not have much control over what would happen to them after their husbands had died. This was in sharp contrast, she argues, with the experience of women in the Latin east. But the over-riding variable in determining women’s agency in their second marriage was
status. As part of this argument, but also in keeping with the theme of regional difference, van Houts finds that lords and kings outside of England had little control over widows—or whether or not they would remarry—while the English kings and lords were “especially ruthless” (p. 151). Although the evidence is not extensive, the marriage patterns of the peasants and lower classes are considered. The care and raising of children were important aspects of remarriage. Here, van Houts mines the sources to come up with examples of parental, particularly maternal, affection for their children. She also explores if children remained in contact with their parents after they had remarried and offers the interesting suggestion that lack of written evidence of such contact was due to the fact that parents and children communicated via oral messages (p. 166).

The final chapter to this section explores clerical marriage. Here the author restores to view a type of marriage that often is not part of discussions of medieval married life. “Whereas much modern scholarship exists on the anti-marital literature of the Middle Ages, the fact that there were many people who were prepared to defend the institution, particularly amongst the married priesthood, may come as a surprise.” (p. 173) Moreover, she demonstrates the affection, if not love, that bound these couples. In the section on “Rhetoric and Domesticity,” van Houts wrings wonderful descriptions and vignettes of life in a clerical household from often recalcitrant—if not downright hostile—sources. We learn that one of the reasons clerical marriage was viewed as problematic was because of the noise and confusion generated by a household full of children, particularly wailing babies and rambunctious young boys. Nor were male clergy the only ones against clerical marriage. Heloise’s distasteful view of marriage serves as an example of women with an intellectual life of their own who did not want to be distracted by domestic realities. On the other side of the argument, those clergy in favor of marriage saw it as part of the natural human state.

To provide a complete picture of marriage, the last section on “Alternate Living” traces the experience of those who eschewed traditional married life by remaining single or living in polygyny. Chapter seven, “Living with One or More Partners,” examines the origins and function of polygyny. Recognising that such relationships could push women to margins of society because they were “unofficial,” van Houts suggests that it was actually women who were active in arguing for monogamy: “As long as elite rich men could get away with treating their formal wives and other female companions as acquisitions or gifts, they maintained the polygyny relationships. As a result of a shift in ecclesiastical and secular thinking from the late eleventh century onwards the male individual was increasingly held to account for his sexual liaisons by the women with whom he surrounded himself, both in formal and informal relationships, who pointed out the significance of gender equality in the eyes of God,” (pp. 206-207). This is a fascinating idea and one that is well supported by the argument, as well as by other examples of women’s agency. Once again, van Houts presents an original interpretation of the evidence and also uses the evidence in an original way. She cleverly examines children’s accounts of their parents’ untraditional relationship to uncover the emotional life of such unions. To provide a comprehensive view of those medieval people involved in polygyny, the chapter also includes discussion of Jewish and Muslim contexts.

The next chapter takes up single life, as the author asserts that understanding single life helps to sharpen understanding of married life. While there has been some research into the lives of single women, little has been done on single men. Van Houts believes that the number of single men across all classes was smaller than that of single women. Even so, the single life was not an option available to many elite women and the author argues that most single women were servants. To animate this life experience, van Houts provides examples of female servants who are recorded in saints’ lives from different times and places. Another population of unmarried individuals was the clergy. The question of self-determination and consent is considered here, in regard to those who wished (or did not wish) to join the religious life. Van Houts points to clergy who supported women whose families were forcing them to marry. She suggests that the emphasis on self-determination catalysed clergy to advocate for consent as essential to marriage and to support women as they sought agency over their own lives.

The book concludes with a tidy summary of the book’s main points. Viewed collectively, the evidence indicates that many assumptions about medieval marriage and married life require re-interrogation—if not
replacement. The assertion that force determined a person’s decision to marry or stay single is challenged by the argument that self-determination was on the rise and was affecting how medieval people viewed marriage. Women’s voices have also been restored to this analysis on marriage. No longer were they all helpless pawns, but rather agents for change and for their own needs. The evidence presented also indicates that the role of the clergy in marriage requires reconsideration. Clergy, instead of being the force behind new attitudes toward marriage, acted as advisers informed by their own family experience. Finally, the author emphasises the emotional dimension of married life, arguing for the presence of love and affection among partners.

*Married Life in the Middle Ages, 900-1300* is an important book for any scholar investigating marriage. While no one book can provide a completely comprehensive view of marriage in the medieval world, this one comes admirably close. The monograph spans 400 years and includes examples from all of these centuries. There is a wide geographic expanse to the discussion—from northern Europe to Byzantium to the Levant. Jewish and Muslim marital experience and traditions are also nicely interwoven throughout the book. Similarly, all classes are considered at some point. This is a study rich in novel ideas that provides much for scholars to consider as well as avenues for further investigation.

One of the most original contributions of this book, in this reviewer’s opinion, is its examination of clerical marriage. The voices of clergy who were hostile to marriage have tended to dominate the narrative. While van Houts uses these sources, she deploys them in a different way. Using the words of some of these anti-marriage clergy, Peter Damian for instance, she is able to uncover homely details about the households of married clergy and to suggest why clerics, like Peter, objected so strenuously to married clergy. Moreover, she adds the voices of clergy who had positive experiences with marriage and family life; for example, those of Henry of Huntingdon and Baudri of Bourgueil. To uncover the domestic life of clerical households, van Houts once again turns to analysis of the bedroom space. The discussion of such spaces within these households illustrates her general point about the importance of sex and affection to clerical couples. What emerges is a compelling picture of clerical marriage and households that allows the reader a glimpse through the front door of these homes. Van Houts concludes that “the snippets collected here cumulatively provide a strong indication that those priests and their wives who chose to marry or, in the face of Church authority to remain married, did so for similar reasons as lay men and women….An even stronger incentive may have had its roots in the emotional attachment and love a married priest’s couple may have felt for each other.” (p. 198) She also postulates that the increase in self-determination that she sees as characteristic of the early 12th century may also have informed clerical marriage. Priests and their wives chose each other as their partner and elected to stay together, even in light of Church prohibition.

Van Houts offers a persuasive new view of marriage. For far too many years Georges Duby’s interpretation of medieval marriage has dominated scholarship. This book challenges Duby’s characterisation of marriage as devoid of affection and his assertion that clergy directed the transformations in marriage. Van Houts’ analysis shows the important role that women played in issues of marital consent and the insistence on marital compatibility. Emotions are also front and center in this narrative. Instead of the cold and calculating description of medieval marriage dominant in the secondary literature, van Houts restores the warmth of the emotional and social life of marriage. Her innovative use of sources helps the author to personalise marriage, as the narrative is peppered with wonderfully rich examples that allow for entry into the emotional dimension of marriage. The author is also deft in how she uses the sources—both textual and material—and only pushes her assertions as far as the sources allow.

*Married Life in the Middle Ages* brings together diverse scholarship to present an accessible and scholarly synthesis that could be easily assigned for classroom use. It offers fresh and original ideas about medieval marriage that are well supported by a range of evidence. Hopefully, in combination with other scholarship, its findings will supplant out-moded assumptions and models of medieval private life that have been so pervasive. Engagingly written, van Houts’ study of medieval marriage is a must-read for anyone interested in the social history of the Middle Ages.
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