

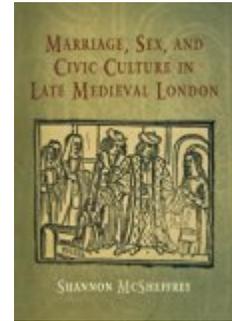
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Shannon McSheffrey. *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. viii + 291 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3938-6.

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## Before Public and Private Spheres: Marriage was Everybody's Business in Fifteenth Century London

Shannon McSheffrey introduces her study of marriage and governance in later fifteenth-century London with a particularly dramatic vignette in which an irate father attempted to force a young man he claimed "violated" his daughter to marry her then and there at home. He employed every weapon available in his arsenal: the weight of his own authority expressed through righteous anger and physical violence; his daughter's shame and angry disappointment; and the threat of a ruined reputation by denouncing him before the mayor and aldermen (p. 1-2). It is a particularly well-chosen story, weaving together all the issues McSheffrey subsequently unravels in her well-researched and rewarding book: patriarchal authority and canon law, reputation and honor, social pressure and civic culture. She argues that although both marriage and sexual relationships were the intimate personal concern of the two participants, they were also matters of public concern in which relatives, friends, civic officials, and parish priests all felt a responsibility to intervene.

This is a local study, and although McSheffrey appreciates more general studies, such as Mary S. Hartman's *The Household and the Making of History* (2004), which allow her to place her own work into a broader context, she justifiably claims that a local study like this best describes the particularities and life experiences of people in past societies. To reconstruct these experiences, she has conducted extensive archival research in the London civic, legal, and ecclesiastical records. Her close reading and interpretation of these records have led her to new

and striking conclusions that separate the social practice of these decades in medieval London from other times and other places, reminding us that medieval society and culture was diverse and that overgeneralizations can be dangerous. She has supplied an appendix that provides a short primer on the characteristics of the legal and administrative records that explain both their strengths and limitations as historical sources. Other sources of which she makes use include the advice manuals, chronicles, moral tales, and liturgical texts that rolled hot off the new fifteenth-century printing presses. She includes a complete bibliography and provides quite useful and extensive endnotes, in which she comments on a number of interesting historiographical discussions. This is a valuable and well-argued study, significantly enhancing our understanding of the impact of gender and family on late medieval urban political culture. Clearly written and accessible enough for undergraduates, its first-class scholarship and significant insights make it an important contribution to the field.

The first part of her study, "Law and Social Practice in the Making of Marriage in Late Medieval London" begins with a brief synthesis of the current scholarship on courtship and marriage in later medieval England. Then McSheffrey conducts us through the process of marriage formation, illustrating every stage with examples from her own research and discussing them in the context of the secondary literature. From courtship, through negotiations, consent and contract, banns, and solemnization, she emphasizes the increasing publicity that ought to ac-

company each step of the marital process. Indeed, one of McSheffrey's main points that she reinforces throughout the book, is that marriage was not an event, but a process which she likens to "a marriage train" (p. 30). According to canon law, a marriage made with the free consent of a man and a woman was valid. Yet social practice reveals that the couple, society, and even church officials only considered marriage complete when the union was solemnized before the parish priest. Although no witnesses except God were necessary for the marriage to be valid in his eyes, McSheffrey emphasizes that, if challenged, two witnesses were necessary as proof before the church court.

McSheffrey's careful scholarship continually sheds light on a number of important points. Of significant value is her informed discussion of those marriage contracts characterized as "clandestine"; the later English medieval understanding of the term is not the way historians have employed it. It specifically designated a marriage improperly or fraudulently solemnized rather than merely secret or unwitnessed. Unlike other historians, she does not use the term when discussing marriages contracted in private or outside the auspices of the church. She contends that such contracts were not clandestine, implying an inappropriate behavior, but a common and usual way of beginning the marriage process. Thus private contracts gave rise to litigation in the church courts not because they were most prone to generate disputes (as Richard Helmholz suggests),<sup>[1]</sup> but primarily "because one of the parties tried to jump off the marriage train, refusing to follow through with the solemnization" (p. 32).

McSheffrey also departs from the conclusions and assumptions of other scholars when she asserts that her evidence reveals solemnization usually occurred inside the church rather than outside at the church door (p. 43). Her argument is persuasive that London custom and practice in the later fifteenth century varied distinctly from both the treatises and other localities. She also produces evidence from the descriptions of witnesses that most London solemnizations followed a liturgy and ceremony far less elaborate than those prescribed in the missals.

The prevalence of "life-cycle servanthood" meant many young men fulfilled apprenticeships and young women entered a term of domestic service before marriage, so that the nonelite followed the northwestern European marriage model. McSheffrey rightly reminds us, however, that due to demographic and social factors, nearly half of all marriages involved widows or widow-

ers, who could range from youth in their teens to septuagenarians. Although one assumes that those embracing marriage for the second time around were susceptible to different degrees of influence by third parties, it is disappointing that McSheffrey's sources were apparently not forthcoming enough to allow her to determine whether this was so.

The rest of the chapters in the first section of the book, discuss the social context in which marriage arrangements were made. McSheffrey's conclusions generally support that "the fundamental paradigm held women to be dependent on and subordinate to their menfolk" (p. 73). Even when women asserted their own choices, their strategic maneuvering fulfilled and reinforced the cultural expectations of female dependence. The evidence of conditional contracts reveals that a woman was more likely to depend on the advice or consent of others before committing herself to a marriage. Even when she used such demurs as a method of negotiation, they reinforced her image—and her very real position—as an obedient daughter.

McSheffrey interpretation of the physical location that couples chose for their marital vows also highlights "the gendered nature of the entry into marriage" (p. 121). Both the places and witnesses of marriage tend to accentuate the woman's reliance on others while at the same time asserting the man's independence. The groom went to the bride's home to make the contract; there was a suggestion of disrepute if the bride came to his. Yet the accepted model of the separateness of the feminine domestic sphere from the masculine public sphere that other historians, such as Barbara Hanawalt and Judith Bennett, described as useful in rural villages does not work for urban London, where the male-dominated workplace was part of the household. Evidence that courtship and marriage contracts occurred regularly in London taverns also indicates that there was nothing inherently disreputable about a woman being in a drinking establishment—if she was with her prospective husband.

The use of the law to enforce marriages again brought the friends, family and community into the business of the marriage. Jurisdiction of marriage rested in the church courts, but property issues were the business of the secular courts, so cases involving badly made marriages could end up in either, or both, venues. McSheffrey discovered that sometimes young women seeking to hold their husbands to the marriage contract had unexpected allies. Although status and gender were of great importance in gaining access to legal remedies, obtaining

the support and influence of substantial men in the community “with more social, political, and economic capital was crucial” in determining what even an abandoned bride could accomplish in litigation. Powerful men in the community did come to the aid of those considered as under their responsibility (p. 120).

In the second part of the book the author argues that such a patriarchal attitude extending beyond the urban household into political society was an important part of medieval governance and affected the development of Western history. Medieval London considered it proper and right that older respectable, established men justly governed the community and the city as they did their households. Such activities established their identities and enhanced their reputations as worthy men. Through both formal and informal avenues, they assumed the responsibility of supervising the relationships of those over whom they had authority, ensuring justice and order.

McSheffrey’s last chapter explores how both reputation and honor, of vital importance in this society, were gendered values. Whereas women’s own identity and reputation depended largely on her marital status and sexual reputation, they also affected masculine respectability as well. Unruly women disrupted the proper social order and damaged the head of the household’s reputation. A man’s good name hinged upon a complicated contest between self-governance and Christian morality on the one side and male sexual and physical dominance over women on the other (p. 164). Class as well as gender influenced how sexual misbehavior affected reputation, especially since a poor man or woman had less good repute to lose. Yet McSheffrey maintains that London displayed stricter attitudes toward elite male sexual transgressions during this period, and such com-

munity disapproval expressed itself in religious as well as social terms. Her conclusion that late medieval London’s civic culture was integrally intertwined with late medieval religious culture directly challenges Caroline Barron’s contention that London civic culture was growing more secular (p. 185). [3]

The book’s strong conclusion brings all the points of McSheffrey’s argument together by contending that the post-enlightenment construction of the barrier between private and public is neither appropriate nor applicable to medieval society. Marriage and other sexual liaisons in late medieval London were intimate relationships, but they were not private and thus were subjected to public scrutiny and control. Throughout her book, McSheffrey persuasively builds the case in support of her central thesis: masculine authority over the household directly extended into London civic culture and nowhere is this so strongly evident than in the public regulation of intimate relationships.

#### Notes

[1]. Richard H. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 2731.

[2]. Barbara Hanawalt, *The Tie that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Judith Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[3]. Caroline Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People, 1200-1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2, 267.

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