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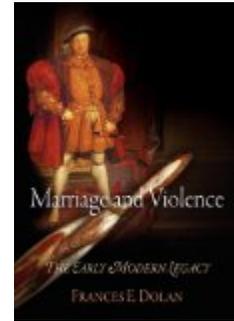
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frances E. Dolan. *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 235 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4075-7.

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Marriage, Law, and Culture in Early Modern Europe

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the debate over preserving “traditional marriage” against the potential ravages of same-sex marriage rages. But what exactly is traditional marriage and where/when has this concept emerged? Frances E. Dolan adds another refreshing perspective and historical context to this discussion. In her book, *Marriage and Violence*, Dolan examines the connections between cultural and legal definitions of marriage in early modern Europe, and the continued influence on the institution in the United States during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Historians previously have compared early modern and modern concepts of marriage by emphasizing the differences instead of continuities that Dolan argues exist between constructions of marriage in these two periods.

Dolan chooses to use what she calls “presentist historicism,” a practice that, in her case, attempts to denaturalize concepts of marriage and demonstrates that modern ideas about marriage, women, and power have historical roots in an “early modern legacy” (p. 19). Through this concept, she focuses on what she calls the “marital economy of scarcity” in early modern and present-day Protestant marriage advice literature, marital stories, and cinematic portrayals of marriage. She identifies three concepts of marriage: the one flesh model of Christian tradition, the unity of person through the legal construction of coverture, and challenges and affirmations of the balance of power in comedic representations. By examining these models, Dolan attempts to show why continuities have persisted across the centuries.

In her analysis of the biblical concept of two becoming one with equality in marriage, Dolan asks whether instead of promoting harmony, a marriage promotes conflict. She argues that the process of two becoming one can only be achieved by “compromise, friction, and loss,” as well as submission of one to the other (p. 26). Therefore competing concepts of marriage, such as companionate marriage, did not replace the biblical concept of marriage entirely, because they did not, in the end, promote increased harmony within marriages. In both periods under investigation, Dolan sees that marital advice literature upheld this principle, often identifying marital discord with a wife’s claim to social equality and a husband’s inability to claim the primary position of leadership. Yet, as she argues, this conflict in hierarchy represents a more complex debate and ongoing discussion about power distribution within the union. Though Dolan identifies the smaller milieu of advice literature as a lens through which to see the marital power struggle at play, she is also quick to note that more macro-global changes, such as the Reformation and the impact of the circulation of the vernacular Bible, affected these intimate relationships as well.

Dolan next examines the gap between the rhetorical myth and the daily reality of negotiating power within a marriage after the loss of a spouse. Whether through natural or unnatural causes, a husband’s death, she argues, gave a widow an important opportunity to consider what the marriage had cost her and what she might regain, financially and legally, in her new status. She examines

a theme that appears prominently in both literature and movies, the idea that to resolve spousal conflict, a wife must murder her husband. This trope, she asserts, is indebted to the legal construction of coverture, a construction of marriage that also migrated across the Atlantic with the settlement of the American colonies. Coverture assumes that marriage only has room for one full person to legally exist. Even as the legal concept of coverture receded, Dolan argues, the cultural concept continues, with women having to depend on and seek the aid of male and authoritative figures to protect them in and outside of marriage. These relationships remain wedded to the concept of women being the weaker member of a marital partnership. By killing off her husband—using violence to end violence—a woman can break out into a world in which she had not previously been singled out legally, thus becoming culturally visible.

Other cultural depictions view violence not as a symptom of marital discord, but instead as an integral part of the marital relationship. Dolan argues that these narratives emphasized the relationship among equality, eroticism, and violence, and often advised women to use violence and force as a tool for running a disciplined household. Thus wives, not their husbands, had control over the hiring and firing of maids. From literature to Shakespearian plays, Dolan argues, intimacy and violence were intertwined, with marital harmony coming only through a careful cultivation of this relationship, a cultivation that remains intact in the twenty-first century as well.

Through her examination of Henry VIII's marriages, Dolan's argument on the connections between law and culture in the construction of marriage reaches its strength. She argues that instead of seeing the legal maneuvering around his marriages as a cautionary tale, writers used his unions as a mechanism to question whether marriage constitutes a sufficiently or reliably happy ending for women. Numerous novels depicting Henry VIII's marriages attribute his flouting of laws to a unique Tudor period, while deemphasizing continuities with the sixteenth century. This point proves more difficult when addressing the unwed Elizabeth I, whose marital status allowed novelists to create fantasies that blurred the gender lines of power between men and women. Dolan points out, however, that Elizabethan novels, unlike those featuring Henry VIII, focus more on her marital status and less on her political acumen, thus continuing the limited power women held within society as seen through the institution of marriage.

Overall, Dolan's book provides an interesting and original comparison of the construction of marriage over the long term and across the Atlantic. She also adds to the growing literature that argues that legal influence stretches far beyond the courthouse and statehouse, but bleeds into the cultural realm and gets transliterated by the middle and working classes. Dolan's work provides a solid model for future comparative endeavors, that like Dolan's book, I suspect will reveal more continuities than disconnects across historical periodizations.

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