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Family history, and particularly the history of marriage, has long been characterized by overly simplistic debates, such as that between optimists, who conceive of early modern marriage as companionate and relatively harmonious, and pessimists, who emphasize the detrimental impact of the double standard and patriarchy, especially on wives. Thankfully, Joanne Bailey’s new book on marriage eschews these sterile debates for an approach to marriage that is both subtle and complex. Her emphasis throughout *Unquiet Lives* is on the co-dependency of marriage partners, and the importance of considering the material as well as the emotional life of wedlock.

After a remarkably concise introduction tracing the broad outline of historiographical debate on late medieval and early modern marriage, Bailey sets out her sources and methodology for studying marriage by focusing on the "secondary complaints" in records of marital conflict. These complaints indicate a "framework of acceptable and unacceptable marital behaviour" (p. 25). (By "secondary complaints" she means those beyond the initial allegations of cruelty, adultery, and desertion.) She uses matrimonial and correction suits for which cause papers survive from Durham, York, and Oxford ecclesiastical courts; records of Quarter Sessions from Northumberland, Newcastle, Durham, North Yorkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Oxfordshire; and public announcements by husbands from local newspapers in Newcastle, York, and Oxford. Beyond this already impressive array of sources, Bailey has done a significant amount of detective work in tracking down individuals and marriage relations through settlement records, overseers of the poor accounts, parish registers, etc. The result of all of this archival work is a database of 1,583 instances of conflict among 1,403 married couples from a wide range of social, economic, and regional backgrounds. Direct analysis of the database is presented in thirty tables in the appendices. Setting the quantitative material at the end of the book, in this way, may inconvenience readers who would like more opportunities to examine the author’s evidence with her conclusions, but it also allows the book to progress in a more seamless narrative, rendering it more attractive to those...
not inured to the tradition of statistical and demog-
graphic family history.

*Unquiet Lives* examines both the expectations
and perceptions of marriage and the actual expe-
rience of matrimony, and Bailey maintains an in-
tense awareness of the tensions that existed be-
tween the experience and ideology of marriage.
Overall, the picture of marriage that emerges is
one in which there was hope for love or affection,
which was believed to be a foundation for mar-
rriage, and a need for “quiet”—that is, living in har-
mony, where each partner contributes to the
household economy and domestic order to the
best of their abilities. Despite significant regional
variations in economy and society, people
throughout England appear to have shared the
same basic framework of expectations of mar-
rriage behavior. From the late seventeenth
through the end of the eighteenth century, mar-
rriages were contracted and survived because of
an equal attention to the pragmatic and emotional
needs of both spouses, and Bailey consistently em-
phasizes the importance of material aspects of
marriage in this work. Inevitably, in a setting of
economic vulnerability, social tensions, and
changing ideals of masculinity and femininity,
many marriages failed to meet this ideal, and so it
was an institution vulnerable to failure, violence,
and disappointment. Bailey details the many in-
formal and formal ways that such marital prob-
lems could be resolved, vividly depicting the net-
work of connections that constituted neighbor-
hoods and wider communities.

Wives and husbands who failed to live in har-
mony could turn to a wide variety of sources for
help in either working out their problems or re-
dressing their grievances: parish officers, justices
of the peace, local lawyers, secular and ecclesiasti-
cal courts, kin, neighbors, servants, and friends—
all of whom could play a role in solving the prob-
lems of discontented households. These solutions,
in turn, encompassed a wide variety of resolu-
tions for problems and punishments for misbe-
havior. Despite the patriarchal nature of eight-
teenth-century society, women were not always
either victimized or marginalized within such dis-
putes.

Emphasizing women’s important functions
within and outside of the household, Bailey ar-
gues that patriarchy was actually quite a flexible
ideology when we look at it in the context of
women’s and men’s lived experience within mar-
rriage. Thus in the book’s fourth and fifth (and to
my mind most important and compelling) chap-
ters, Bailey shows that couples from all ranks of
society depended on mutual assistance. Women
certainly lived under real legal, social, economic,
and cultural disabilities, and this book is rife with
examples of specific problems that befell specific
women because of their gender. However, thanks
to the law of agency—which mitigated coverture
by ensuring that women had the right to purchase
"suitable to the couple’s situation in life" (p. 57)—and women’s roles as workers, con-
sumers, and property owners, wives were far
from passive victims of coverture and the ideolo-
y of patriarchy. Their economic contributions,
Bailey believes, gave women a sense of entitle-
ment to their husband’s assistance, and possibly
even honor. At the same time, their contributions
probably did not give women a real sense of pow-
ner within the household, and they were still vul-
nerable to the physical abuse of their husbands,
as the sixth chapter of the book shows. Despite
their primacy as provisioners and property hold-
ers, men are depicted here as economically frag-
ile; husbands were dependent on wives both for
the maintenance of family honor and the viability
of the household economy. In the end, “in the ma-
jority of marriages, these demands [of maintain-
ing a household] involved both spouses’ work and
led to a marital relationship of co dependency”
(p. 83).

Bailey’s chapters on wife beating, the marital
power balance, and marital chastity all emphasize
the importance of changes over the eighteenth
Shifting responses to marital violence reflected changing conceptions of femininity and masculinity, as well as the rise of sensibility. In particular, there was a transformation in ideas about the relationship of women to sex and violence in eighteenth-century culture, accompanied by a growing fear of men's (especially lower class men's) innately barbaric, violent tendencies. Important shifts in marital relations were thus linked to broader societal changes in this period. Similarly, attitudes towards adultery altered, becoming slightly more accepting of female unchastity and less accepting of men's, thereby lessening the imbalance of the double standard. The chapters portray male coercive power over their wives as limited and contingent. Thus, Bailey admits that "the hierarchical system of patriarchy did give limited license to dominant members of relationships to correct their subordinates with moderation in order to maintain order." But, she adds, "most legal, religious and social authorities recognized that patriarchy contained the potential for men to abuse their power and sought to provide means to prevent this" (p. 113). This argument is consistent and compelling, but it does not lessen the effect of the disturbing images of battered women and dysfunctional households, sections of the legal cases Bailey has reproduced to show patriarchal abuses at their worst.

This is a deeply researched and carefully argued book, and it makes a very important contribution to both family and gender history. Bailey's work should be immediately influential among family historians, and it should generate much discussion among historians of gender. Indeed, in a field already rich with the subtle works of such authors as Margaret Hunt, Laura Gowing, and Anna Clark, Bailey stakes out her own ground and demands that we continue to reassess and render more nuanced our understanding of ideologies and experiences of patriarchy and gender relationships in the eighteenth century.

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