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Sue Sheridan Walker, ed. *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993. x + 221 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-10415-4.

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This collection of essays is dedicated to the memory of Michael M. Sheehan, who was a pioneer in the cojoining of family history and legal history. His study *The Influence of Canon Law on the Property Rights of Married Women in England* (1963) has been the inspiration for the historians who have come together in this volume. Except for James Brundage, whose essay is a general exegesis on the questions of remarriage in medieval canon law, all of the contributions deal with England, most with widows, and legal issues predominate.

James Brundage looks at a very complicated matter in canon law—whether the remarriage of widows was morally supportable. The arguments of theologians on both sides of the issue were at odds with the social realities of the subjects under discussion. The religious issue seems to have been one of the threat of women's sexual nature while, Brundage argues, most widows remarried—if they could—for economic reasons. The incongruence between accepting remarriage and discouraging it made church law on the matter ineffective. The essay clearly states all the positions and it is not the author's fault if, in the end, the matter remains confused. That confusion is merely a mirror.

Joel Rosenthal takes a somewhat different approach in his essay. He sees widowhood as “a gateway of opportunity” for at least some widows. Many women had alternatives for the first time in their lives. Rosenthal uses a combination of quantitative data and anecdotal material to illustrate his thesis about the possibilities available to widows in fifteenth-century England. He finds in his search of the available materials that half of all widows remarried, reentering society in a familiar role. Many were economically unable to make any other choice. Others, particularly forceful women with consid-

erable resources, might choose to remain widows. The celebrated dowagers such as Cecily Neville, duchess of York, and Alice Bryene illustrate the successful, powerful women who could command respect in fifteenth-century England. He concludes that while some women were successful in their choices after widowhood, most were members of “a population of widows who were severely controlled by mutable life circumstances and callous and reflecting sexism.”

Janet Loengard goes back two centuries from Joel Rosenthal to look at dower rights in the thirteenth century. She sees Magna Carta improving widows' legal position at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The fact, however, that so many women had to seek legal recourse against sons, stepsons, in-laws, and lords in order to receive their due depicts the difficulties that women faced in receiving their rights under the law in the face of violence, inaction, and collusion to deprive them of their property.

Sue Sheridan Walker is also interested in widows' appearances in court to sue for dower in the fourteenth century. She sees these widows as willing to vigorously pursue their rights in the royal courts, but unlike their earlier sisters, these women were more likely to use attorneys to argue their cases. This ability to use professional legal services, Walker states, indicates widows' abilities to manage their legal affairs. Walker explains the process involved in bringing suit and goes on to illustrate the types of obstacles that faced women in these proceedings.

In a sad case of women as victims of their husbands' political activities, Cynthia Neville explains the difficulties facing the widows of Edward I's Scottish enemies. These women were denied the right to inherit their husbands' estates because Edward I did not consider Scot-

land to be an independent kingdom. Therefore his opponents were rebellious vassals. Edward thus considered himself free of the normal conventions of war in the treatment of women. Two of the female supporters of Robert Bruce, his sister Mary and the countess of Buchan, were not only deprived of property but were imprisoned in cages that were hung outside Berwick and Roxburgh castles respectively.

Barbara Hanawalt is also concerned with the remarriage of widows, in this case the different options available in rural and urban environments. Generally she sees remarriage as the solution to the problems that widows faced in dealing with the raising of families, managing economic assets, and allaying the fears of those who feared for their moral well being. She sees more freedom of choice for the lower classes than for the nobility.

The last two articles deal not with widows but with wives. Whether or not married women could legally make wills in late medieval England is the subject of Richard Helmholz's essay. While the rights of widows and single women to make wills is undisputed, common law considered the property of a wife to be controlled by her husband. Helmholz cites various cases where the courts upheld a wife's right to make a will in contradiction of common law. However, he argues that by the fifteenth century, the making of wills by married women was uncommon after 1400. He finds two possible reasons for this decline. First, the testamentary freedom that men enjoyed in the fifteenth century meant that wives could not necessarily expect to inherit a third of the estate and therefore women had nothing to will. Second, as trusts became common, wills were less necessary for women because the trust itself would dictate the disposition of the property.

Charles Donahue, Jr., has created a statistical portrait of female plaintiffs in marriage cases in York. He has discovered that female plaintiffs in these cases seem to have been more persistent in pursuing their cases than male plaintiffs, even though men were more successful in obtaining judgments from the court. Possible reasons for this are that women overestimated their chances for success or that they did not have access to the legal advice that men had for assessing the probability of a successful outcome (a position counter to that presented by Walker in looking at the royal courts), or because women had more to gain or less to lose than men. However, while he see some evidence for the last suggestion, Donohue suggests that men were interested in enforcing a marriage when the chance of financial gain was good. Men dropped cases when a successful outcome seemed improbable. Women were more likely to sue to enforce a marriage and less likely to sue to dissolve one—perhaps because marriage would have given women more security and status than it normally did for men. He also hypothesizes that the fewer number of female plaintiffs in the fifteenth century argues for an improvement in the status of women because their economic contributions to a marriage were more equal as social networks became more stable, wages stabilized at higher rates, and women received more in inheritance and dowry.

The collection of articles discussed above give intriguing insights into the circumstances facing wives but more especially widows in medieval England. While none of the essays is the last word on any aspect of women's lives, they raise thought-provoking issues. The authors' use of legal records to illuminate the problems that women faced in medieval England, offer some possible routes for further research.

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