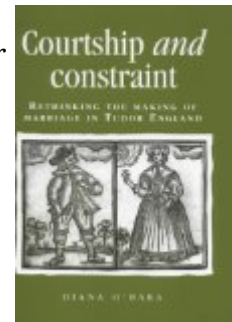


Diana O'Hara. *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. 300 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-5074-9.



Reviewed by Retha M. Warnicke

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This important study is the first to focus solely on courtship in sixteenth-century England. It relies on extensive evidence from the diocese of Canterbury ecclesiastical courts, mainly marriage suits in the archbishop's consistory court but also from some unusual sources for this topic, specifically Act Books and wills. O'Hara noted the problems inherent in using marriage suits for evidence: the full proceedings of litigation are seldom identifiable; official interrogatories shaped the narratives, which are formulaic; plaintiffs, defendants, and witnesses sometimes created fictions to express opinions they believed to be true; and these suits record marriage failures, raising questions about their typicality. For her study, O'Hara was not, however, primarily concerned about the suits' outcome or about litigants' veracity, for her goal was to discover information in the records about the social, economic, and cultural attributes of sixteenth-century courtship. This is a technique that others have also used to flesh out social customs successfully, as, for example, Tim Stretton's study of the Court of Requests.[1] Utilizing quantitative and textual analysis, anthropological theory, and occasionally literary evidence,

O'Hara arrives at both expected and unexpected conclusions.

In a historiographic survey, she identifies and rejects both Lawrence Stone's model of evolutionary, progressive families and Alan Macfarlane's theory of extreme individualism in spousal choice. Instead, she adheres to a third group, a "new consensus," (p. 5) of historians who are more cautious and more flexible in their approaches, although O'Hara also disagrees with some of their conclusions about courtship behavior. For example, from evidence gleaned in court records and wills, she is able to challenge successfully the received tradition that freedom in partner selection was greater among the less well-off social classes, specifically laborers and husbandmen, than among the elite. Very few marriages, according to her, were based solely on the criterion of romantic love.

Love could be only one of many considerations in courtship because wooing rituals and structure required numerous witnesses and participants, including priests, nuclear family members, extended and fictive kin, and other commu-

nity members. Even widows, whom some scholars have endowed with greater flexibility in their marriage choices than other women, felt constrained by the addition of the family and community networks of their late husbands. Much evidence indicates that all social ranks sought to obtain family and community approval of their intended spouses.

In her chapter on the presentation of tokens or gifts, which was primarily a male initiative, can be found a useful appendix of the range of gifts, the most popular of which was monetary. This centuries-old custom lends itself to various interpretations from reassuring the potential mate to creating a sense of indebtedness in her. Often an intermediary delivered the token for the wooer. Unlike other scholars who have marginalized the activities of go-betweens, O'Hara emphasizes their crucial role in match-making. Hailing from diverse social ranks, they were priests, midwives, letter writers, quack doctors, friends, relatives, and neighbors. Widows also seem to have usually relied on male go-betweens in the negotiations for their subsequent husbands.

O'Hara's data on courtship's spatial dimensions support previous findings that, although mobile, English people traveled short distances: 93 percent of these spouses lived within a fifteen mile radius. Local prejudices could prevent the union of inhabitants who dwelled at greater distances. A man from Bristol, for example, worried that his friends would not condone his marrying a Kentish woman and removing to her county. Geographic configurations could also create matrimonial patterns. The homogeneous countryside that spread across Kent and Sussex encouraged county intermarriage while the Medway River formed a barrier to the marriage of Kentish people on its western side with those on its eastern side.

Evidence from 1,304 wills indicates that popular notions about the accepted age for matrimony varied greatly. In providing bequests for sons and dowries for daughters, testators who referred to

the future matrimony of their dependent children rarely provided a numerical age. When one was offered, it was always lower than the Cambridge Population Group's calculation of 26.4-26.1 years for women and 29.3-28.2 for men. Interestingly, O'Hara seldom found bequests or portions that placed constraints upon spousal choice; she speculates that young people internalized prevailing matrimonial values.

Evidence concerning portions or dowries confirm previous scholarly conclusions that they were increasing in real, not just inflationary, amounts. Re-emphasizing that the lower classes did not marry solely for love, O'Hara cites evidence from the wills of laborers and husbandmen that they also provided portions for their daughters, indicating a concern about the rank and the prospects of their children's future spouses. The difference in the size of the dowries of prosperous and less-well-off families seems to have hindered the crossing of class lines for marriage except in instances where newly created incomes could be used to provide portions large enough for daughters, perhaps of the merchant class, to attract aristocratic husbands.

Readers will find this a fascinating and substantial study of sixteenth-century courtship. Care should be taken in generalizing about its conclusions, however, for they rely on records from five Kentish parishes that accumulated in a kingdom composed of diverse communities with varying social practices. Even so, it must be reiterated that in some findings, such as the rise in dowry size, her work confirms previous scholarship. The study's evidence about the behavior of widows supports Sara Mendelson's and Patricia Crawford's claim that the "independence and autonomy" of these bereaved women should not be overstated.[2]

When O'Hara's data are contrasted to Stretton's findings that widows, who comprised perhaps nine percent of the female population, made up almost half the women litigants he studied and

numbered between five and six percent of total litigants,[3] it is clear that these women belonged to a complex social group with a variety of experiences, perhaps deriving from their economic viability. Finally, the greatest significance of O'Hara's detailed archival analysis is her discovery of the cultural bias, which crossed social ranks except perhaps for the truly indigent, that marriage choices should be made in accordance with family and community expectations and not primarily for individual affection or romantic love.

Notes

[1]. Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[2]. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 178, 184.

[3]. Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, pp. 108-09.

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