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Those who have read and benefitted from Barbara Harris’s articles on the familial and political lives of aristocratic women in early modern England will be pleased to now have her book on the subject. Harris has done an astounding amount of research on this class of women. Using family papers and letters, wills, and records from the Chancery and other courts, she has compiled a database of 1,200 aristocratic families in the Yorkist and Tudor periods from which she is able to draw innumerable pithy anecdotes and examples. Harris’s knowledge of late medieval and early modern property and inheritance law also make her book a useful resource for those interested not only in gender but in the history of the period in general.

Harris’s choice of time period is significant. By focusing on the years 1450 to 1550, she rejects the medieval/early modern divide. In terms of political history she presents the Yorkist and Tudor periods as a whole, instead of seeing the Tudor reign as the beginning of a more modern age. According to Harris, the continuities in the lives of elite women outweigh any need to stop or start at 1485. Harris’s book will add further weight to Judith Bennett’s theory of continuity in women’s history.

The book is organized, first, around the lifecycle of elite women, and second, around the spaces in which they were active. Chapters 2 through 7 examine daughters, marriage arrangements, wives, single women, mothers, and widows. Chapters 7 through 9 look at elite women’s activities in their households, among their networks of kin, friends, and neighbors, and at the Court. This organization deftly helps to highlight Harris’s central arguments: elite women became more useful to and powerful in their families as they matured, and their influence was enacted not only in familial, but also in regional and national contexts.

Harris argues that marriage and motherhood was a vocation or career for aristocratic women in this period. Their job was to reproduce their class and use their influence to better their families. In her chapter on wives Harris delineates a uxorial cycle, showing us that not all wives were equal. A young bride living in her mother-in-law’s household was very different from a mature mother and head of household. Harris’s most important point in this chapter is that wisely obedience did not entail passivity. Instead, she argues that obedient wives actively pursued their husbands’ goals and interests. They used their accomplishments, savvy, and knowledge to protect the family’s property and income and to further the careers and marriages of their children. Not surprisingly, Harris finds that widowhood was the most powerful stage of a noblewoman’s life. Widows had done their duty and now were legally independent and often financially prosperous.

By placing women at the center of the aristocratic family, Harris produces some significant findings. For one, patriarchal theory was frequently incompatible with what was required in practice of elite women. Chapter 1 illustrates how aristocratic men circumvented the legalities of patriarchy and ignored patriarchal ideologies when it served their families’ best interests to do so. Despite generalized theories about female inferiority, 77 percent of elite male testators made their wives their executors. Harris argues this shows a faith in the skills of women. Second, elite women were neither complete outsiders nor were they thoroughly assimilated into their marital families. Harris is one of the first to focus on
the continued relationships that married women enjoyed with their natal kin, both fathers and mothers, as well as brothers, sisters, and siblings’ children. Third, Harris goes against the historiography, and argues that widows were not burdens on the patrilineal estate. Instead she shows how widows worked hard to preserve and even augment their children’s inheritance.

Although they are not her focus, Harris is good at acknowledging the women she argues went against the norm. She devotes a chapter to aristocratic women who never married, even though 94 percent of elite women in Harris’s database married. Throughout the book she also provides examples of childless women, a category we know very little about in the early modern era. If marriage and motherhood was a noblewoman’s career, these women would have been unable to fulfill their vocations. Harris says “there is not a single example of a never-married aristocratic woman who accumulated large amounts of property … or who occupied a central position in her … kin network” between 1450 and 1550 (p. 88). Nevertheless, just after Harris’s ending date of 1550, Elizabeth I and women at Court such as Blanche Parry challenge Harris’s assertion.

At times, so much rich material raises more questions than Harris is able to answer. For example, Harris frequently argues that in practice aristocratic women were not always slaves to patriarchy, but she does acknowledge that marital conflicts exposed the inequality of wives. If this was so, how much freedom, influence, or agency did elite women really have in their families? Or rather, was it that female agency was familial only and not personal? In a very entertaining chapter on women at Court, Harris aptly shows the diplomatic and symbolic significance of these women to the monarch and his image. Nevertheless, she does not illustrate how these women used their influence and access to patronage to assist their families—which is one of the book’s main points. But these are quibbles only. Thanks to Harris we now have a female-centered look at the aristocracy, one that clearly illustrates that without the work, savvy, and influence of their female members, elite families would not have fared so well in the past.

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