



Elisabeth van Houts, *Married Life in the Middle Ages, 900-1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Print. 320 pp., £65 (£42.25 for ebook), ISBN: 9780198798897.

Review

Elisabeth van Houts's *Married Life in the Middle Ages, 900-1300* promises to explore the lived experience of married life rather than the institutional history of marriage. She accesses that lived experience, as many literary scholars do, by searching through a combination of historical accounts and literary sources to create as holistic a picture of medieval married life as can be gleaned from across the centuries: 'The lived experience of medieval men and women can be teased out of narrative historical sources and vernacular fiction' (p. 3). Despite this, the introduction to the volume is a long and dense (though important) history of the institution of marriage. This does allow van Houts to focus in the main text on the themes that she sets out, such as the contention between marriage as an institution that was supposed to benefit patriarchal structures and the new insistence in the 1100s on the mutual consent of those marrying. Throughout the volume, van Houts addresses the question of why individual consent became important in the formalisation of an institution intended to benefit patriarchy.

The book is structured into three sections which deal with getting married, various aspects of married life, and so-called 'alternative living', which seems to cast marriage as the normal state of being as it describes single people in the same section as polygyny and concubinage. The first section, 'Getting Married', covers the making of marriage, in which the mix of historical and literary sources show not just the events but the thoughts and feelings of those entering the arrangement, and wedding celebrations. This subsection tends towards elite weddings, as there is less surviving evidence for lower status weddings. The sources that van Houts includes give little

gifts, such as the scene in *Ruodlieb*, in which the hero's sweetheart 'cheekily replied that she would be faithful but demanded the same from him' (p. 65). Such exchanges provide clues as to gender roles, relations, and expectations in the period, as well as humanising the historical sources.

'Married Life' consists of four subsections – 'Sexuality and Love', 'Authority and Collaboration', 'End of Marriage and Remarriage', and 'Clerical Marriages'. The first of these subsections reveals how the historical and literary sources focus on men's sexual experience, as well as how difficult to discern love between spouses in written sources except, in circumstances of separation, where writing is their only means to communicate affection. In the subsection 'Authority and Collaboration', van Houts attempts to show how married couples negotiated their daily lives in a patriarchal society. In her adherence to the historical sources, she presents the practice of female subservience and obedience as fact without comment (p. 124), which jars somewhat with the nuanced gendered relations presented in the rest of the volume. 'End of Marriage and Remarriage' addresses the practicalities of spousal mortality. The section 'Clerical Marriages' draws from a much richer pool of historical and literary sources, given how the clergy wrote and disseminated so much writing.

'Alternative Living' is comprised of a subsection on polygyny, 'Living with One or More Partners', and one on living as a single person, 'Single Life', though it feels odd for those two seeming extremes of the scale to inhabit the same space. Van Houts' personal views seem to come to the fore tangibly in this section, as she denigrates polygyny as a tool for men's use of women for sexual gratification and political alliance. The subsection on single living differentiates monastic singlehood from secular singlehood, noting that it was rare for elite women not to marry and that most singletons were servants. This reveals the class inequalities inherent in the institution of marriage and raises questions about the choices (or their lack of?) that medieval people were

allowed to make. The conclusion brings together material to address the four themes set out in the introduction: the tension between individual agency and collective society, elite women's influence in consent debate, the role of the clergy, and the role of emotions such as love and affection.

Overall, van Houts presents an interesting and well researched overview of marriage in the Middle Ages, though her analysis veers somewhat between presenting the facts and her own feminist outrage (personally, I'd like to see more feminist outrage!). This volume really makes women visible in the institution and everyday medieval experience of marriage, and that is a very good thing. There is a current academic move to recognise women whereas previously men have been assumed to dominate; van Houts brings this perspective to her exploration of marriage, and, in doing so, produces an excellent study that illuminates the experience of marriage in the middle ages.

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