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The Great Catastrophe of My Life: Divorce in the Old
Dominion (review)

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(Review)

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Ribordy suggests, only of a superficial agreement between the two. Giving dispensations for consanguinity, averting its eyes from marriages at too young an age, dissolving non-consummated unions, the Church (or its various practitioners) adapted its legal doctrine in many individual cases.

What Ribordy's study of the fifteenth century suggests, moreover, is a rethinking of the earlier material. Looked at from the viewpoint that she adopts, it is difficult to calibrate to what extent Church attempts at enforcement in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had been any different from what happened later, except for a few notorious cases such as that of Philip Augustus and Ingeborg of Denmark in which it was papal claims to authority over the entire world which were really at stake. Ribordy's approach, in which different aspects of canon law are explored separately, suggests an effective way of re-examining how widespread was enforcement of Church doctrine about marriage during other periods when we have assumed that canon law was enforced. As Ribordy explains for the fifteenth century, for aristocrats the risks were too great that they would lose control of a central political and economic institution for them to allow Church law, particularly with regard to the consent of children to their marriages, to get in the way of their own choices in marriage negotiations. When we consider that it was from this same aristocracy that Churchmen were recruited, it becomes easier to see why canon law was not necessarily universally enforced.

This is an excellent study, containing an impressive bibliography, nicely produced with footnotes rather than end-notes. It is based on extensive reading in the literature on marriage and on sources in Old French extensively cited within the text, and brings clear thinking to a much vexed issue not only for the late middle ages, but for the central medieval period as well.

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ENDNOTE

1. Georges Duby, *Medieval Marriage: Two Models from Twelfth-century France* (Baltimore, 1978).

The Great Catastrophe of My Life: Divorce in the Old Dominion. By Thomas E. Buckley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiv, 346 pp. \$19.95 paper; \$59.95 cloth).

Something like fifty percent of American marriages end in divorce: This is a figure much quoted, and much lamented, in the American media. And of course, to the extent that it is true, it is lamentable; blasted hopes and unfulfilled expectations usually are. But we should be careful not to blindly use the divorce rate as an indicator of the health of the institution of marriage. In the nineteenth century, there were fewer divorces—and, as a consequence, more miserable marriages. By stigmatizing divorce and making it more difficult to obtain, Victorian

courts and legislatures ensured that an important minority of couples drifted along in ghostships of unhappiness. Given inequalities in the law, this was more often true for women. But men too stayed in marriages that hollowed out their hearts. While on a business trip in 1860, Mississippian Henry Craft shuddered at the prospect of returning home to his wife. "In my intercourse with men," he wrote in his diary, "I hear them talk of their homes and their families with a pang at my heart. Others seem to be hurrying home as the benumbed man seeks the fire. . . . Home. What a mockery to talk of my having a home."¹

How prevalent was such unhappiness? How healthy were Victorian marriages? These are tricky questions. The Victorians' reputation for prudery has been ridiculously exaggerated, but their penchant for privacy was very real. In *The Great Catastrophe of My Life*, Thomas E. Buckley provides a rare glimpse behind the curtain of Victorian propriety in his examination of the 471 surviving divorce petitions to the Virginia legislature for the years 1786 to 1851.

During this period, the legislature was the only mode by which an unhappy couple could receive a full, legal divorce. There were other options, of course. Parties to a marriage could, in the immortal words of Wash Hogwollop, "R-U-N-N-O-F-T." Or they could seek to have their separation recognized by local authorities. Innumerable couples undoubtedly took these paths, but such "solutions" did nothing to protect their property rights or their right to remarry. To safeguard these, men and women had to petition the legislature, which meant they had to open up their lives to the prying eyes of their representatives. Though regrettable from their perspective, the result is an historian's mother lode—relatively fat files of petitions, affidavits, and corroborating documentation dedicated to extremely private matters.

In sifting through these files, Thomas Buckley has done an admirable job. His initial three chapters provide context for the petitions. He first examines the attitudes and actions of the legislators themselves, who, despite being occasionally embarrassed and consistently plagued by divorce applications, nevertheless stood steadfastly by their roles as arbiters of the social good and protectors of a social structure based on unbroken marriages and unbroken families. Lawmakers, Buckley concludes, were generally unsympathetic to petitioners who were merely miserable. If they could show that their marriage had never been valid in the first place—as in cases of fraud, bigamy, or impotence—they stood a far better chance. In making such judgments, the legislators drew on a religious sensibility—the subject of chapter two—that strongly encouraged men and women to redeem, repent, reform, and forgive, but never divorce. Finally, in chapter three, Buckley reminds readers that unhappy couples seeking divorce drew families and communities into their conflict. In an era when kinship networks were vast and family fortunes rose and fell together, divorce proceedings became a kind of community theater that reflected and reaffirmed power relations, gender prerogatives, and clan solidarity.

The meat of Buckley's study, however, is the next section, made up of three chapters that examine the divorce petitions themselves. Buckley breaks the petitions into three categories, based upon the petitioner's justification for divorce. Chapter four focuses on petitioners' claims that their spouse had had interracial sex. As might be expected in a chauvinistic society, this was a far more successful argument when made by men against women. Regardless of class, if a man

could prove that his wife had crossed the color line—and testimony that she had given birth to a mulatto child was pretty persuasive evidence—he stood in a relatively strong position. Women, by contrast, stood a better chance if they could prove a spousal pattern of drunkenness, debauchery, *and* consistent, life-threatening physical abuse. In chapter five, Buckley takes up the subject of the battered wife and demonstrates that legislators were most sympathetic to an abused woman who had tirelessly endured her husband's depravity and struggled, ultimately without success, to save him from himself. Finally, in chapter six, Buckley examines those petitioners who sought a divorce on the grounds of adultery. Here too men were more likely to get a sympathetic hearing—but only if they resented the cuckholding couple in the prescribed pattern. Immediately upon discovering the offense, a man needed to throw his wife roughly out of the house and preferably exchange shots or blows with the offending gentleman. Petitioners who took the high-hand with wife and paramour had a sense of honor legislators were more likely to respect—and reward with a divorce. In a final section Buckley presents an extended case study of one woman's harrowing marital experience. The story of Sally McDowell Thomas's very public separation and divorce from her husband, the governor of Maryland, lays bare the steep odds women faced in their struggles to recover *their* lives and *their* honor in a system that stigmatized women more than men, even when they were the victims.

The Great Catastrophe of My Life will be of obvious interest to scholars of divorce and legal history, but it should have a much broader appeal. Like Victoria Bynum's *Unruly Women*, Buckley amasses some anecdotal evidence that suggests that despite the rigidity of its reputation and regime, the Old South was a remarkably fluid place where white women drank, hit back, and took lovers, sometimes even black ones. Frankly, though, Buckley doesn't do much with this evidence. In his rightful sympathy for (mostly) wronged women, he sometimes settles for stereotypes of the (mostly) wronging men. "For many if not most antebellum males," he claims, "violence was a socially acceptable and even expected means of controlling a wife" (179). This is a dubious contention, especially when it goes unfootnoted. More important, even if it were true, it would in no way abrogate historians' obligation to get at a humanly complete set of sources for so much pathetically misdirected rage.

But that of course would have required Buckley to write another book altogether, and he is nothing if not fastidious in cleaving to his stated subject. *The Great Catastrophe of My Life* is, in fact, a model monograph. It ably frames and elucidates its subject, pushes its argument with refreshing modesty, and leaves for the rest of us the larger questions of how to connect it, what to draw from it, etc. This is not a bad thing. In an era when so many books overreach in their subjects and their conclusions, Buckley has called our attention to interesting sources, set them in their proper context, and suggested the modes by which they would be best analyzed. More than this, he has written with real sensitivity and some graceful prose the stories of men and women who defied their society's prescriptions and struggled against long odds to avenge their wounds, redeem their honor, and get on with their lives.

ENDNOTE

1. Henry Craft Diary, December 30, 1860, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis. By David R. Shumway (New York: New York University Press, 2003. xi plus 269 pp.).

David Shumway, who is a professor of English and Literary and Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon University, begins his study of modern relationships with theoretical grounding. Discourses provide the terms that people use to discuss their experience. In his introduction Shumway shows how the discussion of romantic love developed over the hundreds of years before the twentieth century. He speculates that some form of powerful desire between two individuals has transcultural characteristics, but by the middle ages in the West, "the discourse of romance had transformed passion from a pain that it was best to avoid into an experience to be sought." (15) The narrative form of romantic love always required an obstacle in the way of the lovers. Typically, the obstacle was the marriage of one of the lovers to someone else.

Relying on historical work on the family, sexuality, courtship, and marriage Shumway shows that an important shift in the understanding and uses of romance appears in the late 18th and early 19th century. As property and alliance became less important motives for marriage, desire and choice came to predominate. Rather than an outlaw passion lurking on the outskirts of marriage, romance became the gatekeeper of marriage. Karen Lystra's work has shown that middle class women and men after 1830 took for granted that a lengthy, passionate courtship would lead to a love-match. Novels, the main carriers of the romantic discourse during the 19th century, dealt with courtship. Even though most of the popular works of American literature had to dispense with adulterous love as a plot device, obstacles of every other kind could prevent lovers from realizing their passion until the novel ended. But these novels of romance ended with marriage—they were never about marriage.

By the early twentieth century the literature of love had to deal with marriage as the crisis of Shumway's title took shape. As the expectations for personal satisfaction within marriage grew, so did the divorce rate. By 1920 one American marriage in six succumbed to divorce mainly due to the dissatisfaction of one partner or the other with married life. Marriage also became far more important as a place of retreat from the growing alienation in a capitalist society. Using fiction, cinema, and advice literature, Shumway explores the marriage crisis through his discussion of two different though closely related discourses, one based in romance and the other in the late twentieth-century ideal of intimacy.

In the decades following World War I, efforts to address the marriage crisis recast both romance and marriage. Advice writers such as Elinor Glyn and Marie Stopes proposed the "romantic marriage," on the one hand setting aside the tra-