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Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society (review)

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intersection between literary history and the history of politics and economics and what one might call the history of history itself. Clery's study makes real contributions to ongoing discussions regarding gender and sexuality during the British Enlightenment, and it deserves the attention of literary critics and social scientists alike.

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Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society. By DAVID L. D'AVRAY. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. 322. \$195.00 (cloth); \$45.00 (paper).

David d'Avray opens *Medieval Marriage* with a 2004 quotation from the *New Yorker*, outlining, as d'Avray puts it, "how the modern intellectual sees medieval marriage." According to Adam Haslett, the *New Yorker* writer, marriages in the Middle Ages were made for political and financial reasons. Emotional bonds between husband and wife were thus not central to marriage, the idea of companionate marriage arriving only with the Reformation. The medieval Catholic Church, which prized sexual chastity above all, held marriage (and marital sexuality in particular) to be no more than a remedy for human frailty, "a more or less unfortunate necessity" for those who could not remain pure (1). If marital sexuality was less sinful than extramarital sexuality, it remained suspect.

Few scholars of medieval marriage would agree with much of this caricature—as d'Avray points out, this is a clear example of a gap between scholarly consensus and the general knowledge even of the intelligentsia. The great contribution of d'Avray's *Medieval Marriage* is its lucid and masterful explanation for why one of the key aspects of this general picture is wrongheaded: contrary to easy assumptions that the medieval Catholic Church's prizing of clerical celibacy entailed abhorrence of sexuality of all kinds, d'Avray shows that the dominant line of ecclesiastical thinking from about 1200 onward turned in a different direction, toward an extraordinarily *high* valuation of the sexual union of husband and wife. D'Avray's argument turns on an analysis of the social power of a symbolic idea, traceable to early Christianity but only achieving its full force from the thirteenth century, that the consummation of a Christian marriage, the sexual union of a husband and wife, symbolized the mutual commitment between Christ and his church.

In about 400 CE Augustine of Hippo linked the symbolism of God's union with the church to the indissolubility of earthly Christian marriage:

just as the joining of God to his church cannot be dissolved, so also should the dissolution of real marital unions be impossible. In Augustine's own time and for centuries afterward, however, the symbolic power of Augustine's marriage metaphor had little or no practical social effect. Through the late ancient and early medieval eras marriage was largely outside the ecclesiastical sphere, and divorce was freely available. Only in the thirteenth century "did social and legal practice move into line with the symbolic theology of marriage [Augustine] had worked out" (78). A number of historical processes that coincided in the years around 1200 allowed this dovetailing of theological metaphor with social practice.

One of the preconditions, d'Avray suggests, was the introduction of clerical celibacy in the twelfth century. When influential churchmen began to take celibacy seriously, d'Avray believes, they in turn were more likely to be willing to be uncompromising toward the monogamy of upper-status laymen: if clerics could do without women at all, surely laymen could be satisfied with one. Concurrent with the increasing acceptance of clerical celibacy among the church's leaders in the twelfth century was the means to enforce the growing ecclesiastical consensus regarding indissolubility through the development of canon law and the growing power and professionalism of the ecclesiastical courts. Although indissolubility ran counter to the marital practices and strategies of the lay elite, who wanted to cast away wives when necessary, they came to accept these ecclesiastical notions with less resistance than we might expect. The church's attempts in the twelfth century to advance its jurisdiction over marriage and the principle of indissolubility may have been made more palatable through the availability of loopholes in the twelfth century, d'Avray suggests, especially the complexities and impracticalities of the church's own consanguinity and affinity rules, which enabled annulments of marriage in many circumstances. By the time these loopholes were closed by Innocent III's reforms in the early thirteenth century, several generations of Europe's lay elite had come to accept the church's jurisdiction over marriage and indeed the principle of indissolubility itself. This situation allowed for "a new wave of clerical intensity" to wash over Catholic marriage during the thirteenth century in which the symbolism of marriage and its indissolubility became firmly linked (99). As with so much of the High Middle Ages, Innocent III was a crucial figure.

Other scholars (most notably, Georges Duby) have investigated parts of this story regarding the clash of ecclesiastical and elite lay attitudes toward marriage in the twelfth century. D'Avray refines our understanding of these encounters, but he does not limit himself to this conflict. The confluence of factors around the year 1200 produced in Innocent III's Christendom a marital system both highly demanding and unique in world societies, as far as d'Avray knows, with marriage both monogamous and indissoluble.

The heart of his argument lies in his conviction that this unique marriage pattern became embedded in broad social practice beyond the elite. The crucial linchpin that allowed those Augustinian ideas to become central to the social practice of marriage was the treatment of marriage symbolism in late medieval sermons.

Medieval Marriage is something of a companion piece to d'Avray's 2001 book, *Medieval Marriage Sermons: Mass Communication in a Culture without Print* (Oxford University Press). There d'Avray argues that in the age of the friars, that is, in the thirteenth century, preaching constituted "a system of mass communication." Manuscripts of model sermons survive in relatively large numbers, but d'Avray contends that what survives is but a tiny proportion of the original numbers of such manuscripts, and in turn each model sermon could have been delivered many times. While Augustinian marriage symbolism is largely absent from the surviving corpus of sermons before 1200 or so, sermons from the thirteenth century onward presented marriage in a highly positive light. Not only did these sermons employ the Augustinian metaphor of marriage for the union of God with his church, but they linked that metaphorical usage to real earthly relationships between husbands and wives. It was through these sermons, d'Avray believes, that the recondite ideas of academic theologians came to shape practice: "In the age of the Franciscans and Dominicans marriage symbolism was propagated so insistently and repeatedly to so many people that it must have been a social force" (20).

Marital sexuality was neither contrary nor irrelevant to that symbolism but central to it. Consummation of marriage repeatedly stood in these sermons for the "absolute commitment" of Christ to his church (59). The commingling of the bodies in the marital sexual act paralleled the unity of God and his people. Other culturally available models dissociated the symbolic meaning of marriage from real human marriage, as, for instance, Cathar heretics' distinction between the good "spiritual" marriage of the soul with God and the bad corporeal human marriage. As d'Avray notes, however, late medieval orthodox sermons, perhaps even in response to those Cathar concepts, chose an alternative path, repeatedly linking real worldly marital sexual unions with the symbolic understanding of marriage as the union of God with humanity. Indeed, the symbolism itself rested upon "a literal-sense idea of marriage as good and holy" and not as inherently evil or sinful (64–65). This is not to say that all sexual acts were infused with the divine: if marital sexuality reflected divine commitment, sex outside that marital union was a serious defilement.

D'Avray's argumentation is careful, logical, and founded on deep research in a broad range of sources from late antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages (a number of key unpublished texts are presented in a long appendix). By necessity, d'Avray's arguments in part rest on logical inferences and best guesses, but he is scrupulous about acknowledging the limitations of

his evidence. Although it is in many ways a specialist work in which the technical details that underpin his argument are laid out in full, the larger arguments d'Avray makes are of great significance for our understanding of the development of Western sexuality.

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The Origin of the World: Science and Fiction of the Vagina. By JELTO DRENTH. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. Pp. 300. \$29.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

In what is an admittedly vast approach to a subject, Jelto Drenth attempts to cover historical and contemporary medical and social perspectives on female anatomy and sexuality as well as representations in literature and popular venues such as television and movies. His material ranges from famous works of contemporary fiction and the work of icons such as Freud to obscure films and medical texts. Although the title of the text suggests that the work focuses on the vagina, Drenth takes as his subject everything from the clitoris to the uterus to menstruation; although he notes in his own work that there is a tendency not to speak about female anatomy or physiology with any specificity (“down there” as a popular euphemism, for example), Drenth seems unwittingly to replicate this trend in his own choice of title. For some, this breadth will undoubtedly be the appeal of the book, but I found this approach led to a work that provides interesting facts from time to time but offers no real thoroughgoing argument or analysis. Drenth writes that the book has turned into a “rich miscellany of bizarre facts” (9), and this is both an honest and accurate depiction of the text’s structure and methodology. Perhaps what is most problematic about such an acknowledgment and approach is that, at times, Drenth’s desire to discuss all things related to female physiology leads to incomplete accounts, oversimplified assertions, and inaccurate information.

Chapters 1 and 2 offer an introduction of sorts, with chapter 1 focused on the author discussing his own social location as a man writing a text about female anatomy and physiology and in particular his profession as a sexologist. Drenth notes a certain tension, and although he momentarily pauses to ponder what investment a man might have in writing on the subject, he doesn’t offer the thorough explication of his social positioning that some feminist scholars might expect. Instead, he muses on his own experiences as a teenage boy and the ongoing tropes of mystery and power that many men attribute to female sexuality, tropes that Drenth argues are present in narratives as varied as nursery rhymes to classic scientific texts of the Middle Ages.