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ONE HUSBAND, ONE WIFE, WHADDYA GOT?

Kathleen DuVal

Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Polygamy: An Early American History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. xv + 397 pp. Figures, maps, notes, and index. \$32.50.

In January 1855, Parley Pratt wrote a loving letter from San Francisco to Belinda Marden Pratt, his wife. He told her about a woman he believed—correctly—that his wife would sympathize with, because both women had suffered through difficult first marriages. “She is the very counterpart of your self,” Parley wrote. As Belinda once had, she “is groaning under a bondage,” but one “tenfold more terrible ... than yours once was” (p. 279). Their stories would take a happier turn, though, with both women finding a safer home and a kinder husband. Both would become wives of Parley Pratt. Parley’s tender words and Belinda’s appreciation of them are pretty much the opposite of what most of their American contemporaries thought of plural marriage. Critics of women who defended plural marriage would call them an “infernal minister of the devil,” a “duped drudge,” and a “martyr to unbridled lust” (p. 3). Just the year before Parley sent his letter, a U.S. official in Utah had written that polygamy “belongs now to the indolent and opium-eating Turks and Asiatics, the miserable Africans, the North American savages, and the Latter-Day Saints” (p. 284).

That sentence alone reveals a great deal about the 1850s, and a lesser book focused on polygamy in early America would have found plenty of material by centering only on ignorant critiques like that one, starting with Spanish priests coming to North America to change the continent’s heathen ways. Sarah Pearsall’s marvelous new study does analyze these many critiques and uses them to illuminate the long history of early American thinking about marriage, gender, sexuality, and power.

Even more significantly, though, *Polygamy* introduces us to people like Belinda Marden Pratt who lived in—and sometimes purposefully chose—plural marriage. Parallel to more prominent nineteenth-century reformers, she scrutinized marriage, and she came to the conclusion that polygyny (one husband and multiple wives) was the best system for children and for women. In her experience, “by mutual and long continued exercises of toil,

patience, long-suffering sisterly kindness” as they maintained a household and mothered children together, sister-wives created the best kind of family (p. 277). Through this kind of close look at polygamy in practice, this breathtakingly ambitious and successful book analyzes power in early America “as seen through households, which is where most people actually lived” (p. 1).

As Pearsall’s diverse and compelling chapters on polygamy took me from the seventeenth-century Pueblos of New Mexico to the palaces of eighteenth-century Dahomey to 1850s Utah, I found myself surprised at just how useful polygamy was. Polygamous marriages, like monogamous ones, served many purposes: production and reproduction, legitimizing lineages and inheritance, forging diplomatic ties, building and broadcasting power, and providing long-term love, sex, and companionship. Sister-wives lightened Belinda Marden Pratt’s work both physically and emotionally at the same time as they bolstered their husband’s prestige among other men and into future generations (including Mitt Romney, a great-great-grandson of Parley and his fourth wife).

In addition, as Pearsall repeatedly proves, plural marriage is (to paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss) useful to think with, for historians as much as for theologians, politicians, and reformers. By de-normalizing monogamy, the book contextualizes all marriage and brings new insights to women’s history, family history, and the study of sexuality. Pearsall’s tenacious research in archaeology, language, and astoundingly wide-ranging primary and secondary writings uncovers polygamy in all kinds of places, often where it was hidden in plain sight. As she did in her previous book, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (2009), Pearsall connects the intimate to the grandest scales of power, colonialism, and race, showing that gender, family, and sex are hardly sidebar subjects but instead are key to understanding just about everything men and women do.

First of all, polygamy “was as much about economics as it was about sex” (p. 40). In the 1690s, French Jesuit lexicographers struggled to translate the Illinois phrase *niouikicgoua* for their French-Illinois dictionary. It could mean simply “c’est ma femme” (this is my wife), but that short definition didn’t seem to get at the full Illinois meaning. So, the definition continued: “she makes my house, she gives me a place to live, she cares for me, she gives me food” (p. 66). In most parts of North America and West Africa, women were the primary farmers. They grew the food that fed their families, and they produced agricultural and home-manufactured goods that their people sold into wider trade networks. Bearing and raising children brought many women joy, could offer them a sense of purpose, and also created a labor force to work for the household and the larger society through the generations. As the Illinois definition implies, many seventeenth-century Native women literally built their family homes and provided the hospitality that diplomacy, trade, and politics all required. It should be no surprise that both the men and women of a family could find it useful for a household to have more than one wife.

In some places and times, the devastation and separation wrought by colonization increased the appeal of polygamy. In times where warfare killed or drew away large numbers of young men, plural marriage helped with gender imbalances. Igbo people in West Africa suffered population losses from war and the Atlantic slave trade, in parallel to Algonquian losses in northeastern North America from war and disease. For both, polygamy was a way to grow families, in part by making refugee and captive women into wives. Foreign wives would increase the household with themselves and the children they bore, and children would have multiple mothers to provide for them if they lost one. In Algonquian languages, different words for wives tellingly distinguished the “wife of my country” from “foreign woman married into this country” (pp. 63–4).

In discussing captive women who became wives, Pearsall takes the opportunity to remind readers not to romanticize plural marriage any more than to unthinkingly condemn it. Incorporating captured women at times became a vicious cycle, creating more raids, violence, and displacement. This deep look at the history of polygamy exposes the quite different meanings a marriage might have to a senior wife managing a houseful of female and child labor versus a woman stolen from her people and forced to live intimately among enemies.

Indeed, Pearsall’s book is full of startling and revealing juxtapositions. At the same time that some seventeenth-century enslaved West Africans were building household compounds in Virginia on polygamous models drawn from their homelands, white Virginians developed a monogamy so rapidly serial that it resembles polygamy. The plantation records of Robert “King” Carter include a foreman called George and “his Wives, Betty and Bess” (p. 135). This family was legally owned by Carter, himself the son of a fourth wife of five consecutive rather than overlapping marriages. Carter inherited his wealth at the death of his older brother, and he himself married a wealthy widow soon after her first husband and his own first wife died. The combination of multiple marriages, early deaths, and plantation slavery built Carter a tremendous fortune that he passed down to his own ten children. They in turn would practice the “extreme endogamy” of elite eighteenth-century Virginians, marrying within a tiny number of wealthy local families while maintaining a separate set of sexual and reproductive relationships based on “the sexual vulnerability of enslaved and servant women” (p. 146). If Virginia’s elite men had practiced polygamy and legitimized all of their descendants, U.S. history might have gone quite differently. Certainly, polygamy could have helped Europe avoid its wars of succession, and all the wives of Henry VIII might have kept their heads.

In any case, polygamy served political as well as economic goals. In most of the societies where Pearsall finds polygamy, only elite men could have multiple wives. Large and fruitful households gave these husbands power

and resources at home and in their relations with foreigners. In contrast to outsiders' portrayals of polygamous marriages as lust gone out of control, in fact they could be "an indicator of carefully calibrated social orders as well as a sign of prosperity and kin connections" (p. 120). Among the Guale people of what is now southeastern Georgia and northeastern Florida, only leaders—*micos*—had more than one wife. One *mico* introduced a visiting friar to his two wives, who, the friar noted, wore "deerskins in place of the common dress ... for grandeur" (p. 36). Later they would adopt Spanish cloaks and other clothing and goods to further distinguish themselves from Guale commoners, but they would not give up polygamy despite Spanish pressure. In contrast to societies like the Guales that reserved polygamy for an inherited elite, late seventeenth-century Apaches rewarded individual men who had been successful warriors or raiders with larger households.

Plural marriages could facilitate diplomacy and increase regional influence. Native Californians used marriages to build community with neighboring peoples who spoke different languages. The seventeenth-century Mohegan sachem Uncas married first the sister of the previous sachem (sisters being particularly important in matrilineal lineages) and next the widow of a Pequot sachem. Eventually Uncas married at least six high-ranking women as he became regionally prominent. In the Chesapeake, Powhatan expanded his power over a large number of towns through marriage and child-bearing. (Pocahontas was the child of one of the women he married in a town he brought under his influence.) High-ranking Mormon men gained status in this life and the next through plural marriage. Polygamous marriages made Wampanoag leader Metacom and Pocasset leader Weetamoo into double in-laws when Weetamoo married Metacom's brother and Metacom married her sister, and Weetamoo further expanded their family influence when she became the third wife of the sachem of the Narragansetts. Their family would use these connections to fight against the English in the 1676 conflict sometimes called King Philip's War and sometimes called Metacom's War but that Pearsall suggests calling Metacom's and Weetamoo's War. (I have already changed my lecture notes for the next time I teach this violent episode.)

As Weetamoo's history reveals, women as well as men created polygamous households. As Pearsall explains, outsiders often assumed "that the only or indeed the main actor in these households was the husband, and that the individual patriarch acted as he wished," but in fact "even a powerful leader was still constrained by larger structures of households, economies, and kinship" (p. 71). The usefulness of polygamy could be small-scale as well as grand and could go in different directions depending on needs, including various kinds of family planning. While incorporating refugee and captive wives could bring more babies to a family, multiple wives could also give women some escape from the incessant dangers of pregnancy and childbirth—no trivial accomplishment in an era when "repeated childbearing literally killed" (p. 13).

It was much easier for a woman to insist on longer sex-free times between births if there were other legitimate sexual partners and potential child-bearers in the household.

Despite the difficulties of covering all of this complexity across North America and beyond, Pearsall never lets us imagine marriage—of any kind—as a timeless and unchanging institution. Some West African polygamy became a site of increasingly centralized masculine power in the face of devastating wars and slaving. And practices and beliefs about marriage changed again as West Africans tried to apply them under conditions of American slavery. As Utes in the eighteenth century increasingly incorporated secondary captive wives to process hides, Pearsall argues, these “households become places of greater hierarchy and coercion” (p. 227). In the past as today, traditional marriage was a contested idea, and “making use of older systems of household organization” was not a continuity of past and present but rather “a process, a strategy, and, sometimes, a contest” (p. 116). In the longest-lasting change, “monogamous heterosexual marriage as the only form of allowable marriage was one of the legacies of colonial conquest,” although it seems that change is destined not to be eternal either (p. 291).

And sometimes people intentionally changed marriage practices for political as well as religious and practical reasons. Po’pay, the primary leader of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, “democratized polygamy” in order to recruit non-elite men to his anti-Spanish force. Expanding polygamy gave these men a privilege and a stamp of status that was traditionally reserved only for leaders, men who had in the past been particularly enviable because they had been able to protect their families from enslavement and had been exempt from paying tribute and labor to the Spanish. Po’pay’s program was both a return to traditional ways and a novel method of expanding power and unifying previously divided people.

But Pearsall is a historian who will not let us leave with only a story of men building male power. Her chapter that includes the Pueblo Revolt begins with a woman painting a pot with an ancient Pueblo pattern “revitalized in the dramatic new worlds of the 1680s” (p. 21). The work that created “the most successful rebellion against colonial rule in North America in the seventeenth century” was done partly by wives as they formed new families out of people who spoke different languages and had different histories (p. 21). Protecting their children and escaping the labor and tribute demands of the missions were every bit as important to women of the Pueblos as to their husbands, and Spanish sexual violence had particularly terrorized women. Their work—beyond the scope of Spanish documents but surviving in pottery and in the architecture of the new towns they built as strongholds on mesas above their old homes—created “communities made new but rooted in tradition” that would survive through the following centuries (p. 46).

Of course, polygamy could also be useful as an accusation against outsiders. The particular horror with which sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish missionaries described polygamous practices came out of the Spanish “drive for orthodoxy” as they sought to distinguish themselves from Jews and Muslims in the Reconquista (p. 25). Calvinists in New England inherited Catholicism’s proscriptions against plural marriage but worried over how to understand that insistence in light of Old Testament patriarchs’ many wives and the lack of explicit condemnation of polygamy anywhere in the Bible that they tried so hard to follow. By the eighteenth century, European imperialists and their American descendants saw tyranny in polygamist men, whether Turkish sultans or Mormon leaders, as polygamy “served as a shorthand for societies lacking law and religion, in which a few brutal men exercised capricious power,” the opposite of the self-image the Enlightenment had led them to craft for themselves (p. 119). Moving toward the nineteenth century, European and white American writers increasingly described polygamy as one of many alien practices that were inherent to permanently backwards races.

Yet polygamists fought back. Cherokees, for whom sororal polygyny (sisters marrying the same man) had long upheld matrilineal lines, responded with a “defense of household sovereignty,” even as some of their nineteenth-century political and economic changes seemed to mirror transitions that white Americans were experiencing (p. 216). Belinda Marden Pratt connected the personal to the political in publishing her *Defense of Polygamy* to counter the much larger volume of publications condemning women like her and their husbands—for more, see Sarah Barringer Gordon’s excellent *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (2003). Cherokees and Mormons, in company with women’s rights activists including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Sarah Grimké, pointed out, as Pearsall puts it in her characteristically understated humor, “early modern monogamy also had its shortcomings” (p. 12).

Pearsall’s skill in telling specific histories of particular peoples in particular times while keeping her eye on large structures of power reminds me not only of her own previous work but also that of Juliana Barr, Christina Snyder, and Michael Witgen. In similar ways, these historians take individual women and men seriously while never underestimating the power of forces beyond their control. If we are going to define early America as multi-peopled and multi-perspectival—which we must do—we cannot in the process shove its residents into categories that would have made no sense to them. These people were different from one another and very different from ourselves today. Like Pearsall, we must try to understand their categories and their ways of understanding their own place and time. We are but historians, only

partially grasping parts of the past, never truly understanding what it was like to be our subjects.

Sarah Grimké wrote that “man has exercised the most unlimited and brutal power over woman, in the peculiar character of husband” (p. 258). Perhaps the greatest achievement of *Polygamy: An Early American History* is its close attention to the actions and thoughts of particular women and their husbands, while analyzing them within structures that often were created to bolster men’s power generally. Grimké’s poignant lament is part of Pearsall’s story, but it is far from the only truth in the long and vexed history of marriage, a piece of which this book tells so well.

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