
This collection of previously published essays fills a gap in classroom resources for the study of medieval family dynamics. *Medieval Families* provides a solid introduction to "the development of the field. The essays are arranged chronologically to demonstrate the mutual interplay, stimulation, and criticism fundamental to the exploration of a new scholarly field" (4). The anthology admirably serves several important pedagogical and critical purposes: first, to orient readers to this quickly developing field; second, to illustrate the complex and critical interdisciplinarity of scholarship in medieval studies; third, to provide a starting point for further study of medieval families and their extensions and permutations.

With "Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries" (1974), Mary Martin McLaughlin was one of the first to attack Philippe Aries's thesis, in *Centuries of Childhood* (English trans. 1962), that there was no sense of childhood as a discrete phase of life in the medieval period. McLaughlin's essay seeks the emotional tenor of historical sources; brings a variety of materials (hagiography, correspondence, law and legislation, and encyclopedic and literary texts) to bear upon the question of parent-child relationships; and situates these questions in a broader social context (infanticide, child discipline and abuse, tutors and mentors, and so on). She ascertains that there were complex, sometimes ambivalent, emotional relationships between parents and children.

Diane Owen Hughes draws on twelfth- to fourteenth-century Genoese notarial records, in "Domestic Ideals and Social Behavior: Evidence from Medieval Genoa" (1975), to compare the family practices of the artisan class with those of the merchant aristocracy.
The documentary material allows Hughes to distinguish the contours of family structure and lineage, material wealth and physical space, and social roles and expectations. In general, aristocratic families tended to be more patrilineal while merchant households were more conjugal in orientation.

Michael M. Sheehan’s “Choice of Marriage Partner in the Middle Ages: Development and Mode of Application of a Theory of Marriage” (1978) offers the theology of marriage as a coherent starting point because the canonists and theologians examined all aspects of marriage and family life as theological and legal thought developed across the Middle Ages. By the fourteenth century the necessity of the marriage partners’ free consent and commitment emphasized in twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts had entered into local law and was enforced in legal decisions.

David Herlihy’s “The Making of the Medieval Family: Symmetry, Structure, Sentiment” (1983) argues that, in contrast to the ancient world, households in the medieval period became generally comparable, commensurable, and symmetrical across social strata and geographical regions. Herlihy asserts that in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the agnatic or patrilineal family became dominant over the cognatic or bilineal form, leading to an emphasis on monogamy, an increase in affectivity, and the emergence of the role of daughter/wife as mediator.

Judith M. Bennett’s “The Tie That Binds: Peasant Marriages and Families in Late Medieval England” (1984) is as particular and localized as Herlihy is summative and generalized. Bennett applies an anthropological approach to the ample manorial records from early fourteenth-century Brigstock, Northamptonshire, to reconstruct the network of legal, familial, and economic relations that emerged from the marriage of Henry Kroyl, Jr. and Agnes Penifader. Bennett concludes that, in the lower classes, marriage generally benefited the husband’s socio-economic status and tied the wife’s fortunes more closely to her husband’s, but, at least in this case, had little to no impact on either the couple’s parents or children.

John Boswell argues in “Expositio and Oblatio: The Abandonment of Children and the Ancient
and Medieval Family” (1984) that the ancient practice of child abandonment or “exposure” and the related medieval practice of oblation, or the donation of children to the church, is not evidence of generalized antipathy toward children. In contrast, exposure and oblation offered many children a better life than their natal parents could provide, particularly in monastic donation. Both practices gave families some control over the composition and structure of the household to mitigate the effects of poverty and social dislocation.

Pamela Sheingorn's “Appropriating Holy Kinship: Gender and Family History” (1990) charts the development of the iconography and devotional practices related to Holy Kinship—the composition of Jesus’ extended earthly family—and the Holy Family from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. She concludes that the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries emphasized Christ’s patrilineage. After a shift toward Mary’s matrilineage in the fifteenth century, the late sixteenth-century reforms reasserted the traditional Trinitarian (masculine) emphasis on Christ’s ancestry.

The rise in the veneration of St. Anne, Mary’s mother, parallels a rise in affective piety and feminine spirituality while the increased devotion to St. Joseph in the later period corresponds to increasingly restrictive feminine gender roles in the broader culture.

Michael Goodich’s “Sexuality, Family, and the Supernatural in the Fourteenth Century” (1994) examines the hagiographical narratives used in the canonization process for clues to household disruptions created by illicit sexual activities. Prohibited sexual activity, especially in adolescents, was evidence of the intrusion of evil forces, while the saint’s intervention often led to penitential change.

Kathryn Gravdal finds, in “Confessing Incests: Legal Erasures and Literary Celebrations in Medieval France” (1995), that while penitentials and canon law deal primarily with sexual contact within the seven prohibited degrees of consanguinity, Old French vernacular texts more often detail incest within the nuclear family. Both types of texts are heavily inflected by gender, for the penitentials
scarcely mention fathers while
the secular texts involve women,
often daughters sent out in a
coming-of-age story.

Sally McKee’s “Households in
Fourteenth-Century Venetian
Crete” (1995), based on her
examination of nearly 800 wills
and 200 marriage contracts,
demonstrates that at this colonial
edge of Christian Europe,
the core of the household
consisted in bigenerational
units, but testators’ bequests
also recognized members of the
extended household, including
servants, dependents, domestics,
and other non-kindred, even
slaves. In this case, the common
perception that the medieval
period truncated the extended
family household of the ancient
world proves false.

The final essay, Steven Epstein’s
“The Medieval Family: A Place
of Refuge and Sorrow” (1996)
tests Herlihy’s (and others’) assertion that medieval families
were affectionate against the
notarial evidence of thirteenth-
century Genoa. He also uses
the thirteenth-century Genoese
Dominican Giovanni Balbi’s
magisterial Latin dictionary,
the Catholicon, to ascertain
“normality” in domestic life by
charting changes in usage from
earlier dictionaries, and he uses
the insights of Levi-Strauss and
Freud to discuss the complex
dynamics of, for example, incest
and child abuse.

Medieval Families: Perspectives
on Marriage, Household, and
Children amply fulfills its task
“less to define the current state
of the sub-discipline of family
history than to suggest the
shape and the dynamism of its
recent growth” (4), and I can
recommend it for classroom
use, perhaps in concert with
the primary sources in Love,
Marriage, and Family in the
Middle Ages: A Reader, edited by
Jacqueline Murray (Broadview,
2001). My only quibble—and
this is less a problem than a
comment on the limitations
of the edited collection as a
form—is that several crucially
important scholars (Richard
Helmholz, Richard Trexler,
and particularly Barbara
Hanawalt) are not represented.
Nonetheless, Medieval Families
is a fine addition to the
University of Toronto Press’
Medieval Academy Reprints for
Teaching series.

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