

David Gary Shaw. *Necessary Conjunctions: The Social Self in Medieval England*. The New Middle Ages Series. Palgrave, 2005. pp 206.

This fascinating work studies court documents from the Borough Community in Wells in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries to explore the creation of “social selves” as they are expressed through, and mediated by, community, specifically the Wells community of burgesses. Shaw’s thesis is itself unsurprising; the medieval “self” is fundamentally a social one, produced through a complex interaction with communities that restrict, enable, and depend on an individual’s honor and fidelity. Hence the title *Necessary Conjunctions*, which indicates the inextricability of individual identity from the possibilities produced by the group, and the group’s symbiotic dependence on the selves constituting it. However, Shaw’s thorough and often gripping study of the Borough Community’s court records reveals a surprising fluidity in these social selves as they interact with the community to enhance or redeem their

individual honor, jockeying for status among those of their own rank. He provides an intriguing account of how burgesses in Wells engaged the community, particularly through the court, to serve their own social ends and describes a milieu in which citizens were able to employ convention to assert highly individualized social selves.

Early in the work, Shaw sketches the foundational values of the social self—honor, fidelity, and respect for hierarchy—emphasizing that these concepts work interdependently and are, for men, malleable, as these men struggle to gain honor through deploying and developing bonds of fidelity as part of acknowledging others’ and asserting their own place within local hierarchies. The social self Shaw describes coming into being through and in these values is decidedly male, the woman’s social self subsumed into the man’s of whose she is a constituent element. In his own words, “this book represents the

affirmation of the proposition that men and women cannot be taken apart in this period and that women's *social* selves suffered as a consequence. If this world was a system, it was one in which women counted much less as a group than they did as individual—important but subordinated, even sublimated—parts of a complex social person” (24). For Shaw, then, the social self is one recognized by an institution, and the institution he chooses to study is one that does not recognize women.

Though we see little of women in this work, Shaw offers an intriguing discussion of the interaction between individual men and the Borough Community, describing the means by which the latter, having bestowed its prestige on the members invited to join, demanded their fidelity through discipline and coercion by, for example, expecting that its members sue in its court or apply for a license to sue in the King's Court. The granting of such licenses marks what Shaw calls the community's “self-limiting power” in that it relinquished cases that might antagonize elite members and thus

damage cohesion in the group as a whole. Equally powerful was the threat to expel those members who transgressed against the community (usually through challenging its hierarchy), thus solidifying the community's own values. Yet he also describes gestures of benevolence designed to adjudicate disputes fairly while taking into account both parties' needs. For example, the court frequently provided debtors time to repay debts as a way of ensuring that the debtor's business prospects remained strong even as the debtee received his due. So rather than simply rendering judgment, the court took pains to make those judgments manageable for the losing party. Extensive use of arbitrators to negotiate settlements was another means of treating litigants gently and fairly and provided members a way to extend honor through the arbitrators they chose and through being chosen to arbitrate. The fines levied in such cases were generally “forgiven” by the winner whose gain was in the affirmation of his honor, while the community's gain was in achieving peace. Emphasized in this section is the Borough

Community's desire for a harmonious populace that benefits from membership in the community while enhancing the community's honor, and that this community also, and crucially, provides a place in which social standing can be negotiated.

Having established the larger interaction between member and community, Shaw then considers more closely how individuals carve out their social identities through their interactions with one another, particularly through alliances and attacks. It's here that examining court records shows its limitations. Shaw can piece together friendships only in the form of political alliance as suggested through the choice of arbitrators in a court case and the types of cases burghesses brought against each other. This emphasis on the litigious necessarily suggests that medieval burghesses recognized their social selves primarily in terms of competition within their own rank in a relentless quest to establish their own honor as higher than another's. Examining documents the purpose of which is to record dispute, the pitting of one self

against another, necessarily produces a picture of social interactions as highly and relentlessly competitive. Nevertheless, Shaw is often able to identify surprisingly subtle modes of agency and interaction from these documents, particularly as he traces alliances between plaintiffs, defendants, and arbitrators, and examines the rhetorical functions of petty violence in marking the self's boundaries. He goes on to look briefly at clothing, handiworks, and death arrangements to emphasize the material dimension of the social self and the individual's capacity to use the material world to inscribe and revise that self.

Readers specifically interested in women's lives will find this book disappointing as women appear infrequently in the court records Shaw studies, material that is, as he acknowledges, "especially masculine in its origins and uses" (191), yet the depth of his study of men's social selves in urban daily life is a substantial contribution to our understanding of medieval masculinity.

*Francine McGregor  
Eastern Illinois University*