

for power over women's bodies. It is especially useful to have this realm of gender relations opened to non-specialists in medieval medicine, because it operates largely outside the sphere of the church and offers a useful counterpoint to aspects of medieval culture with which humanists are more likely to be familiar.

Monica Green's *Making Women's Medicine Masculine* has done a great service for medical history and has simultaneously opened up a rich vein of material to anyone interested in literacy and gender issues in the Middle Ages.

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Yossef Rapoport. *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp xii + 137.

THIS EXCELLENT BOOK should be on the reading list of every course on medieval women's history, whether or not it explicitly strives for cross-cultural analysis. Just as Paula Sander's amazing 1991 essay on the status of hermaphrodites under Islamic law helped historians of Christian Europe crystallize their thinking about gender boundaries,¹ so Rapoport's book on marriage, divorce, and all their property implications reminds those of us who work primarily on the Christian tradition how peculiar Christian views of the indissolubility of marriage were. The book is sophisticated enough in its arguments to provide meat for several graduate seminar discussions, but clear enough in its explanations to be accessible to advanced undergraduates. The inclusion of a glossary of technical terms further facilitates use by the non-specialist.

Rapoport makes use of a wide range of evidence to reconstruct the realities of marriage, divorce, and property in late medieval Mamluk society (1250–1517, which encompassed Egypt, Palestine, and Syria). As he notes, “divorce was pervasive” (p. 1)—indeed, so casual in some cases as to raise the perplexing question of how it did not completely destabilize patriarchal society by allowing so many women to emerge out from under the authority of husbands. A central feature of Islamic law is that the husband, and he alone, has the right to unilaterally divorce his spouse simply by saying so. Yet Rapoport finds that besides unilateral divorce (*talaq*) and judicial divorce or annulment pronounced by a court (*faskh*, which would be invoked, for example, in cases of the husband's disappearance

or abandonment), there were also many instances of consensual divorce (*kbul'*) which, Rapoport finds, were always initiated by the wife.

The singular virtue of Rapoport's study is that he is determined to move beyond legal formulae and the debates of jurists to explore what marriage and divorce meant in practice. One of his first tasks is to look at marriage and the property and expectations that bride, groom, and their respective families brought into it. While men offered the bride a marriage gift, it was usually not paid in full at the time of the marriage; the bulk of the payment would usually be deferred until death or divorce ended the marriage. The woman's dowry, on the other hand, was usually many times larger than the husband's gift and served as her complete inheritance from her natal family; she brought it in full (usually in the form of a trousseau) into the marriage and lived off of it or bequeathed it to her children. Unlike Jewish custom, the dowry remained the woman's sole possession and under her control in marriage, divorce, and widowhood.

A second question raised by the pervasiveness of divorce in later medieval Muslim society is how so many single women were able to support themselves outside of marriage, especially since few of them (aside from the elite) owned real property. In part, Rapoport has already answered this by explaining the basis of marital property. But he pushes the question further by offering an extended study (chapter 2) of women's paid work. The use of slaves meant that certain tasks like domestic service and even wetnursing and prostitution were not viable areas of employment for freewomen. Rather, he finds it likely that many women supported themselves in divorce in much the same ways they did while married: by working in textiles as spinners, embroiderers, and seamstresses. (Weaving seems to have largely been gendered male.) He also finds evidence for religious houses (*ribats*) that sheltered divorced and widowed women. Rapoport is very cautious in drawing parallels with Christian religious houses; he sees such arrangements as more aligned with the phenomenon of the Beguines than with cloistered Christian religious orders. He does, however, find evidence that there was a "surplus" of women in later medieval urban centers, which suggests that further explorations of the Beguine parallel might prove worthwhile.

Perhaps the most fascinating section is Rapoport's discussion of what he calls "the monetization of marriage" (chapter 3), which had the ironic effect of giving women considerably more power within marriage, including putting them in a position to dissolve it. Seeing the Black Death as a major turning point in gender relations, Rapoport finds that the later medieval period witnessed a shift away from older practices of the husband being responsible to

feed and clothe his wife by providing gifts in kind toward a practice of giving the wife monetary payments. This was combined with an increasing practice of paying the marriage gift in installments rather than two separate (and often incomplete) payments at the beginning and end of the marriage. The surprising result of this shift was that it put women in the position of being able to demand payment from their husbands at will. His failure to do so then became grounds for her to seek judicial aid, which might land him in jail and ultimately lead to divorce.

Admittedly, there are aspects of this slim book (a mere 114 pages of text) that readers may find frustrating. While all the topics listed above are indeed relevant to the topic of marriage and divorce, the “connective tissue” to make their mutual relevance apparent is often missing, suggesting a rather rushed passage from dissertation to book. After chapter 2, for example, we never hear anything further about women’s wage work, and the section on oaths made (by men exclusively) on pain of divorce, while fascinating, might have been more persuasive for Rapoport’s claims about patriarchy had it been more tightly woven into the arguments from other sections of the book. Likewise, some topics that seem pertinent are never mentioned. For example, medieval Christianity allowed annulment for sexual impotence (or any impediment to sexual intercourse) while Judaism allowed divorce on the basis of the woman’s infertility; neither of these issues is mentioned here. Perhaps they were rendered less important in Muslim society because of the permissibility of polygyny and sexual use of female slaves. Yet anthropological work on modern Islamic cultures suggests that infertility in particular is a major factor in divorce, and it would have been interesting to know if such attitudes had a longer history. Similarly, we find little discussion about respective ages at marriage. Although there is some passing data (e.g., p. 39) that brides might be as young as eleven years old, there is little recognition that such extreme youth must have handicapped many women’s ability (at least in their first marriages) to negotiate the terms of their marriage contracts. Finally, “high mortality” is often invoked as a causal factor (e.g., p. 113) yet no evidence is brought forward to explain precisely what this means.

Overall, however, this is a very important book and it makes a fitting contrast to Donahue’s massive *Law, Marriage and Society* which similarly attempts, for northern Christian Europe, to move beyond the abstract pronouncements of theologians and reconstruct how marriage (and its failure) were actually conducted.² Being more conversant in gender theory than was Donahue’s study (and lacking the rich court archives on which Donahue was able to

draw), Rapoport's is perhaps the more innovative book methodologically. It is certainly among the most useful studies available for our understanding of medieval marriage and life outside it.

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NOTES

1. Paula Sanders, "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law," *Women in Middle Eastern History*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1991), pp. 74–95.
2. Charles Donahue Jr., *Law, Marriage and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008).



Cordelia Beattie. *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England.* Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. x + 179.

CORDELIA BEATTIE makes a prominent contribution to the field of single-women studies with a very clear and smart series of arguments concerning the use of the category of single woman in a variety of texts from across late medieval England. Her focus is on classification: who had the power to classify in this society, where classifications overlapped, how to place both classifiers and classifications in their appropriate contexts, and how modern scholars might understand medieval classifications on their own terms. Although she is interested primarily in how those in various positions of power in late medieval England classified unmarried women, an important overarching theme emerges, that is, the need for scholars to read texts carefully in order to appreciate the complexity of medieval society. Beattie models this to great effect through a series of close analyses of primary sources.

After exploring medieval understandings of single women in her introduction, including the legal construct of *femme sole* [single woman] and the dominant religious hierarchical categorization of virgin-widow-wife, Beattie presents a series of case studies. In each she examines different types of medieval texts and considers the assorted classifications used among these texts and, most rewarding, within the same type of document. The variety of documents is important because "no single example should be taken as representative" (p.