
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.

Daniel Kline
University of Alaska, Anchorage