

# UNQUIET LIVES

## Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England, 1660–1800

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## *Introduction: reassessing marriage*

In 1675, Grace Allenson, reflecting on her unhappy marriage, told her servant ‘that if she might have but bread and water to live on she were happy if she could but be quiet with it’.<sup>1</sup> Charles Pearson, a merchant tailor, also echoed *The Book of Homilies*’ sentiment that quiet in marriage should be prized above houses, servants, money, land and possessions.<sup>2</sup> In the advert that he placed in 1756 in the *York Courant*, announcing his and his wife’s mutually agreed separation, he mused ‘What is all the World without Quietness?’<sup>3</sup> More than tranquillity, quiet evoked peace of mind and body, undisturbed by rage or passion. This study reconstructs the types of behaviour that constituted a quiet or unquiet life in England in the long eighteenth century. It is based on fragments of information from over 1,400 marriages that were in difficulty between 1660 and 1800 (Appendix 1), ranging in length from a few formulaic lines to hundreds of detailed pages. Much of this was written by a clerk of court or typeset in a provincial newspaper, although occasionally a surviving letter in a spouse’s own hand poignantly conveys the intimacies of wedlock across the centuries.<sup>4</sup> The evidence that is produced about the nature of married life is elusive and inscrutable. After all, the reality in sources is difficult to pin down, for the ‘truths’ that they contain are diverse, contradictory and dependent upon the teller.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, it is important for the historian not to treat these moments of extreme marital tension as abstracts. These events, invariably sad, sometimes uplifting and touching, often brutal and callous, had great meaning for the people involved. This book is about more than the ideology of marriage and marital roles. It conveys something of marriage as it was lived in England from the perspective of the middling

<sup>1</sup> BIHR, CP.H/3264, *Allenson c. Allenson*, 1675, Cruelty Separation, Margaret Green’s deposition.

<sup>2</sup> *Book of Homilies, The second Tome of Homilies, of such matters As were Promised and Entituled in the former part of Homilies* (London, 1633), p. 247.

<sup>3</sup> *Y.Cour.*, 21 September 1756, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> UOD, DDR/EJ/PRC/: Correspondence received by proctors or lawyers, and letters that were submitted as evidence.

<sup>5</sup> See Bailey, ‘Voices in court’.

sort and wage labourers. Reconstructing a set of national expectations about married life, it shows how these altered in a period of great social, economic and cultural change.

It is vital to understand married life in the past. Marriage mattered in much the same ways as it matters today. Governments attempted to control it, the church tried to retain some hold on it, pundits bemoaned its state, and most proclaimed it the key to social order. Matrimony has always been at once a public and a private institution. The pre-modern household, a social and economic institution, linked to other households in a chain of credit, often had the conjugal couple at its centre.<sup>6</sup> Marriage shaped the lives of most adults, whether they entered informal or formal versions of it, or did not marry through choice or circumstance. It marked physical, emotional and economic maturity and – depending upon sex – wealth, status and participation in civic and social duties and rights.<sup>7</sup> It is hardly surprising that historians have used it to explain demographic shifts and to explore kinship, parenting, economics, work, law, property ownership, violence, sexuality and reputation. Though matrimony is frequently discussed by historians, few historical studies are entirely devoted to it. The formal rules and informal customs associated with its making and, to a lesser extent, its breaking have received some attention. Reflecting the way that marriage was rooted within its social, economic, demographic and cultural environment, it is usually considered as a discrete section or chapter in a diverse body of work. When this literature is used to trace the development of marriage over the centuries, it becomes apparent that there are only a few key interpretative debates, which have been determined by the available source material. It also highlights the areas where more research and new interpretations are necessary.

Information about the experience of late medieval marriage is limited. In this period matrimonial cases that came before the church courts were mostly about the formation of marriage rather than its breakdown, providing little detailed information about married life.<sup>8</sup> Even elite experience of

<sup>6</sup> C. Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (London, 1998), pp. 9, 97, 148–72; K. Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (London, 2000), pp. 30–4, 300–3. The contemporary understanding of ‘household-family’ was flexible and did not necessitate that it was formed around a married couple; nonetheless they still retained the hierarchical form, with heads of household and dependent members (N. Tadmor, ‘The concept of the household-family in eighteenth-century England’, *Past and Present*, 151 (1996), 111–40).

<sup>7</sup> For examples of such rights, see D. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), p. 287; S. Mendelson and P. Crawford, *Women in Early Modern English Society, 1550–1720* (Oxford, 1998), p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> M. Ingram, ‘Spousals litigation in the English ecclesiastical courts c. 1350–1640’ in R. B. Outhwaite (ed.), *Marriage and Society: Studies in the Social History of Marriage* (London, 1981), p. 36; P. Rushton, ‘The broken marriage in early modern England: matrimonial cases from the Durham church courts, 1560–1630’, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 5, 13 (1985), 191.

marriage is less accessible than in later centuries, given the scarcity of personal records like letters, memoirs and diaries.<sup>9</sup> The most useful surviving sources relate to work.<sup>10</sup> Inevitably this shapes the questions that are asked about marriage, centring on a debate about what wives' contributions to the domestic economy and household meant in terms of relative power between spouses. The consensus among historians is that late medieval spouses worked equally hard to ensure the efficient functioning of their households. Elite wives hired and fired domestic servants, and in their husbands' absence managed estates and acted unilaterally to protect their land or goods.<sup>11</sup> Rural and urban couples of lower social status formed economic partnerships and their work is described by historians as complementary. Thus while wives' productive labour varied according to locality, was less specialised than their husbands' and adapted to their reproductive life-course, it contributed to a successful household.<sup>12</sup> Where historians disagree is about how far this translated into any type of power within marriage. Alice Clark, writing in the early twentieth century, personifies the traditional approach with her argument that wives' contributions to their husbands' enterprises rendered them mistresses of the business as well as domestic sphere. Their work was so important that young unmarried people did the 'menial' domestic tasks usually associated with married women. Not only did wives gain public value from this 'family enterprise', husbands could be fruitfully involved in parenting.<sup>13</sup>

The view that joint labour caused some practical equality between spouses still has its supporters, but on the whole the idea that the pre-industrialised world was a 'golden-age' for women has been adapted or rejected.<sup>14</sup> The revised version demonstrates that women's overall status fluctuated. For example, following the Black Death they enjoyed increased work opportunities and improved wages. Pertinently, it is proposed that this allowed them to defer matrimony or exercise a wider choice of marriage partner.<sup>15</sup> In turn, the economic recession and increase in labour supply by the late fifteenth century

<sup>9</sup> Notable exceptions include N. Davies (ed.), *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1971, 1976), Vol. I.

<sup>10</sup> For example, administrative records such as tax records and manorial court rolls relating to fines imposed on regulated areas of employment.

<sup>11</sup> M. Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 65–6.

<sup>12</sup> H. Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 69–71, 93; B. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bind: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 141–7; J. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (Oxford, 1987), p. 118.

<sup>13</sup> A. Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, 3rd edition (London, 1992), p. 157.

<sup>14</sup> For an example of a fairly traditional view, Hanawalt, *Ties that Bind*, p. 153. For an overview of the debate see S. H. Rigby, 'Gendering the Black Death: women in later medieval England', *Gender and History*, 3, 12 (2000), 745–54.

<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the terrible mortality may simply have reduced the numbers of men available for marriage.

reduced women's opportunities, making marriage their only economic option. It is inferred that the former state granted wives more independence and value, while the latter caused a hardening of gender divisions, relegating women to a more passive role in marriage formation, and, one imagines, within married life itself.<sup>16</sup> The theory is rejected, on the other hand, by historians who insist that there was continuity in women's status in both marriage and work and who question the link between the two. They point out that female subordination was unaffected by changes in the availability and remuneration of labour because both failed to improve women's social power or legal rights.<sup>17</sup> Thus, whatever work wives did, husbands controlled material resources, the work that was done and the profits that labour brought.<sup>18</sup>

Historians of early modern marriage do not resolve the debate. Having found little evidence that wives achieved formal power as a result of their contributions to the domestic economy, the question has in some sense become less urgent and its serious analysis is left to medievalists. Historians who investigate early modern marriage continue to be interested in questions of relative power and authority, but their approach is framed by the nature of the sources, which shift the basis of the debate from work to emotion. In the first place, personal records are more widely available. The way historians have used these sources has varied. Thus Lawrence Stone's controversial account of an emotional transition from cold distant marital relationships in the sixteenth century to initially more patriarchal, but ultimately closer relations between spouses in the seventeenth century has been replaced by case-studies which reveal the affectionate, dynamic nature of specific marriages from several social ranks.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, the increase in advice literature for married couples after the Reformation helps structure the debate about marriage around patriarchy. Thus, it often turns on how far this ordering principle of the household, with men as heads of household exercising authority over their subordinate wives, children and servants, was mitigated by love, personal character or, occasionally, wives' material contributions.<sup>20</sup> There was a tendency to propose that

<sup>16</sup> P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300–1520* (Oxford, 1992), p. 361; Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, p. 114.

<sup>17</sup> Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society*, pp. 30, 96–100.

<sup>18</sup> Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, pp. 115, 139; Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Stone, *Family, Sex, Marriage*, pp. 88–9, 145–6; A. Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* (London, 1995), pp. 154–72; K. Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (London, 1982), pp. 95–8, 101–4; R. A. Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450–1700* (Harlow, 1984), pp. 102–6.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, p. 191.

these factors rendered most early modern marriages companionate. Recently, a rather less cosy image of wedlock has been offered. Laura Gowing's reconstruction of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London marriage is very different. These couples shared few activities, goals or expectations because their social and cultural lives were gendered to such an extent that they were entirely oppositional. In spite of the female agency that she demonstrates, the conjugal power relationship was depressingly skewed in favour of men.<sup>21</sup>

Thirdly, litigation concerned with conjugal breakdown, which replaced disputes in the church courts about marriage contracts from the sixteenth century, also shapes analysis of marriage. The most detailed suits were separation from bed and board, which was sought by couples on the grounds of adultery and cruelty, and it is noticeable that most work about married life actually considers wife-beating and extra-marital sex.<sup>22</sup> Male violence can provide evidence about the exercise of male power within the early modern household. Detailed information about wife-beating in matrimonial litigation, its legal status, the advice supplied to husbands about correcting their wives, and references to domestic violence in popular literature have all inspired studies of wife-beating. The evidence is ambiguous, however, and has resulted in two positions. In one view, male violence was an accepted, or at least, expected, feature of married life, and considered a rational response to female disobedience.<sup>23</sup> There is, nevertheless, evidence that husbands' potential to beat their wives was legally, socially and culturally controlled. Wife-beating paralleled public violence in that it was tolerated when it corrected inappropriate actions, was exercised in a limited way and monitored by neighbours, friends and family.<sup>24</sup> In the light of these restrictions on male tyranny, therefore, other historians argue that contemporaries viewed wife-beating as abnormal, irrational behaviour, which represented unmanliness.<sup>25</sup> Both views about wife-beating infer an unchanging male desire to use violence against women. Similarly, work on the sexual double-standard prevalent in literary, prescriptive and legal writings, and studies of the numerous defamation cases in the church courts relating to sexual slander, privilege chastity as the key to single, married and widowed women's

<sup>21</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, pp. 4–5, 180–231.

<sup>22</sup> In a 22-page section about marriage, 8 pages are devoted to wife-beating and sexual behaviour, with several more about men's authority and how women dealt with it, in Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern English Society*, pp. 126–48.

<sup>23</sup> R. Phillips, *Untying the Knot: A Short History of Divorce* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 97–100; Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, pp. 219–20.

<sup>24</sup> S. D. Amussen, "‘Being stirred to much unquietness’: violence and domestic violence in early modern England", *Journal of Women's History*, 6, 2 (1994), 70–89.

<sup>25</sup> E. A. Foyster, 'Male honour, social control and wife beating in late Stuart England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series 6 (1996) 214–24; Wrightson, *English Society*, p. 94.



reputations.<sup>26</sup> For example, defamation cases imply that wives needed to avoid any behaviour that raised suspicion, because it would lead to marital conflict and damage their standing in the local community.<sup>27</sup> In this context, the fact that most adultery separation cases were brought against wives leads to the conclusion that men's extra-marital sexual behaviour was unlikely to be punished within or outside marriage, and consequently had little effect on their reputation.

The influence of the source material is striking when we consider the marriages of wage labourers. The lack of personal records means that discussion about their unions is often restricted to the mechanics of the making and breaking of matrimony. Stone speculated, for example, that the poor's lack of property permitted freedom of choice regarding who and when to marry, and made it easy for poorer men to abandon unsatisfactory marriages.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, sources such as parish poor-relief records, settlement papers and prosecutions of vagrants, all of which reveal evidence of desertion, highlight the instability of the marriages of those vulnerable to poverty and form a bleak picture of callous male deserters and their pitiful starving wives.<sup>29</sup> This approach has been counter-balanced recently by more perceptive work that shows that the lower ranks were subject to constraint in making marriage. For example, in periods of social, economic or demographic stress, parish authorities frequently prevented the marriages of the poor.<sup>30</sup> Even more significant is Diane O'Hara's reassessment of the making of marriage in the sixteenth century, which reveals the extent to which poorer people themselves exercised caution on entering marriage. Her conclusions that men's and women's choice of marriage partner was influenced by material calculation, rather than personal attraction, raise many questions about married life itself.<sup>31</sup>

It is not easy to characterise marriage between 1660 and 1800 because the secondary literature is so fragmentary and the same sources as those in studies of earlier periods tend to be used, in spite of a wider range of available evidence, like newspapers, better surviving quarter sessions records, and the plethora of related cases in the equity courts and civil suits. Stone's *Road to Divorce* and Leah Leneman's account of separation and divorce in Scotland

<sup>26</sup> The classic text on the former is K. Thomas, 'The double standard', *Journal of History of Ideas*, 20 (1959), 195–217; the range of work for the latter is substantial, but for a recent interpretation see Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, p. 230.

<sup>28</sup> Stone, *Family, Sex, Marriage*, p. 89, and *Divorce*, p. 141.

<sup>29</sup> For instance, Snell, *Annals*; Kent, 'Gone for a soldier'.

<sup>30</sup> M. Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 131; S. Hindle, 'The problem of pauper marriage in seventeenth-century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (1998), 71–89.

<sup>31</sup> O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint*.

are useful, but catalogue the formal methods of leaving marriage rather than exploring the nature of married life itself.<sup>32</sup> Amanda Vickery's convincing chapter on married life in Georgian England and Margaret Hunt's work on middling-sort marriage in the early eighteenth century use wider sources, but they only provide a picture of five provincial gentry and professional marriages and a handful of middling-sort London relationships. Moreover, in Hunt's opinion the female agency that she uncovered was unorthodox and probably unique to London.<sup>33</sup> Analyses of nineteenth-century marriage provide little retrospective information on its eighteenth-century counterpart. Influenced by industrialisation and modernisation, these accounts view the last quarter of the eighteenth century as a precursor to later developments. Late eighteenth-century marital roles, for instance, are investigated in studies exploring the role of gender in the formation of the middle and working classes.<sup>34</sup>

It is also problematic that people writing about nineteenth-century married life have preconceptions about the eighteenth century. One claim that needs to be tested, for example, is that working conditions in the pre-industrial household fostered conjugal friendship and harmony.<sup>35</sup> This hypothesis is linked to escalating industrialisation, which reopens the question of the relationship between the economic role of wives and their power status within marriage. Anna Clark, for instance, proposes that shifts in employment patterns and different working conditions influenced the quality of relationships between spouses.<sup>36</sup> This approach recalls that of Alice Clark, by centring on whether women's employment opportunities were declining, forcing them to depend on their husbands, or increasing, creating independence, and how husbands reacted in terms of violence.<sup>37</sup> Issues about gender, class and shifts

<sup>32</sup> Stone, *Divorce*; L. Leneman, *Alienated Affections: The Scottish Experience of Divorce and Separation, 1684–1830* (Edinburgh, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> M. R. Hunt, 'Wife Beating, Domesticity and Women's Independence in Eighteenth-Century London', *Gender and History*, 4 (1992), 10–29; Hunt, 'Marital "rights"'; also see J. Hurl-Eamon, 'Domestic violence prosecuted: women binding over their husbands for assault at Westminster Quarter Sessions, 1685–1720', *Journal of Family History*, 26, 4 (2001), 435–54.

<sup>34</sup> Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*; L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> J. Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (London, 1999), p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 75.

<sup>37</sup> For example, it is argued that enclosures, the switch to pastoral agriculture and mechanisation of the textile industry in Somerset made male labourers increasingly dependent on their spouses. The resulting tensions found expression in their physical abuse of their wives (P. Morris, 'Defamation and sexual reputation in Somerset, 1733–1850', Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick (1985), p. 393). Also see N. Tones, 'A "Torrent of Abuse": crimes of violence between working-class men and women in London, 1840–1875', *Journal of Social History*, 11, 3 (1978), 328–45. A less stereotyped view is provided by S. D'Cruze, 'Care, diligence and "Usfull Pride" [sic]: gender, industrialisation and the domestic economy, c. 1770 to c. 1840', *Women's History Review*, 3, 3 (1994), 315–45.

in working conditions coalesced in literature about separate spheres for men and women and a new emphasis on the ideology of domesticity.<sup>38</sup> Both inform another problematic claim, which is that men's role as husbands only came under sustained criticism in the Victorian era.<sup>39</sup> It is an argument that is surely shaped by the proliferation in legislation pertaining to divorce, wife-beating and married women's rights to property and children, which places much emphasis on male cruelty, the class aspects of wife-beating, and the sexual double-standard.

This overview of work on marriage across five centuries reveals that, regardless of the period under consideration, historians seem to be divided into two views about marriage, which can be described as pessimistic or optimistic.<sup>40</sup> For example, pessimistic medievalists concede that married women might have contributed equally to their household, but insist that their work was different, controlled by their menfolk and rated secondary to men's.<sup>41</sup> Since it never altered the dominant ideology about women or their legal, economic or political standing, their state in marriage remained one of dependence. In public terms, the lives of married men and women were particularly divergent with few common experiences.<sup>42</sup> For pessimistic early-modernists, the sexual double-standard ensured that wives' lives were shadowed by their sexual reputation, which restricted their personal and public activities. Husbands, in contrast, bathed in the sunshine of permissiveness, for their wives turned a blind eye to infidelity, and their personal sexual behaviour had little impact on their reputation.<sup>43</sup> All are sure that wife-beating was common and not abnormal.<sup>44</sup> In sum, pessimists tend to see spouses' experiences as oppositional.<sup>45</sup> Optimists propose that marriage was more mutual and complementary, whether they define it as a partnership or companionate, depending on the period in which they specialise.<sup>46</sup> They argue that the pre-industrial household encouraged harmony between spouses because they often worked together in the same trade, craft or occupation.

<sup>38</sup> For a comprehensive overview, see L. Davidoff, M. Doolittle, J. Fink and K. Holden, *Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy 1830–1960* (London, 1999), pp. 3–15.

<sup>39</sup> A. J. Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-century Married Life* (London, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> The same point can be made about medieval women's history (Rigby, 'Gendering the Black Death').

<sup>41</sup> Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, pp. 115–39; Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society*, p. 100.

<sup>42</sup> Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, pp. 139–40.

<sup>43</sup> Stone, *Family, Sex, Marriage*, pp. 81, 146, 315–17; Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, pp. 1, 3, 8, 229–31.

<sup>44</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern English Society*, pp. 128, 140.

<sup>45</sup> For example, *ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>46</sup> Hanawalt calls medieval peasant marriages partnerships, specifically rejecting the term companionate (*Ties that Bound*, p. 219).

Such economic partnerships caused wives' contributions to be socially valued and led to shared goals and less likelihood of domestic violence.<sup>47</sup> Optimists invoke the formal and informal restrictions on male tyranny, the recommendations in most advice literature that husbands be affectionate, and the cultural demands that men employ self-control, along with wifely 'non-confrontational' tactics, to emphasise the extent to which the potential in marriage for men's oppression was tempered. Furthermore, spouses' complementary social interests and joint economic endeavours led to some shared components of reputation, which softened the blow of the sexual double-standard.<sup>48</sup>

The two views are partly explicable because contemporary culture itself, whether sermon, pamphlet, ballad or newspaper, promoted an idealised view of harmonious relations between spouses while simultaneously demanding female subjection. Historians have offered a range of explanations for this contradictory state of affairs. Some differentiate between a restrictive ideal and a permissive reality. Keith Wrightson concludes that patriarchal and companionate marriage were 'poles in an enduring continuum in marital relations', but that most were the latter form because the potential for very authoritarian relationships was mitigated by the demands of daily life.<sup>49</sup> Tim Stretton observes that it was the gap between reality and prescription that facilitated patriarchy's success, by ensuring that if women could not live up to the positive images that were promoted, they tried not to live down to the negative ones.<sup>50</sup> Another view is that early modern people saw no inconsistency between male authority and affectionate partnership. Anthony Fletcher, for example, argues that protestant conduct-book writers and their male audience saw little discrepancy in their twin values. While they were eager to experience the strong bonds of mutual marital love, they wanted to maintain social and gender order in uncertain times.<sup>51</sup> Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford nonetheless note that male writers stressed subjection, while female writers emphasised companionship.<sup>52</sup> Other historians have argued that the inconsistency in the advice about marital relations was recognised. Thus Linda Pollock comments that the sexes were reared and socialised to

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 153–5; Houlbrooke, *English Family*, pp. 106–10.

<sup>48</sup> Wrightson, *English Society*, pp. 91–104; Vickery, *Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 85, 86; Houlbrooke, *English Family*, p. 119.

<sup>49</sup> Wrightson, *English Society*, p. 104; Shoemaker, *Gender*, p. 112.

<sup>50</sup> T. Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 10–11, 229.

<sup>51</sup> A. Fletcher, 'The protestant idea of marriage in early modern England' in A. Fletcher and P. Roberts, *Religion, Culture and Society in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 161, 180–1.

<sup>52</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern English Society*, p. 135; K. Davies, 'Continuity and change in literary advice on marriage' in Outhwaite (ed.), *Marriage and Society*, p. 60.

deal effectively with the dual demands made on them of subordination and competence.<sup>53</sup> What is clear is that one of the reasons for the patriarchal system's longevity was that it allowed flexible behaviour. Fletcher has shown how it was adapted, as a gender system, in order to ensure its success.<sup>54</sup> Pollock has concluded more recently that patriarchal power was not simply mitigated, but that the structural conditions of the system limited its fullest expression. She critiques any simplistic categorisation of family relations as either affectionate or oppressive, observing that they could be many things at different times because relationships changed over a lifetime according to circumstances and priorities.<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, the pessimistic and optimistic models are problematic for several reasons. The discrepancies between them cannot be explained by variations in regional economics and industries, or the couples' rank, wealth and life-course. Marriages from a similar period, social status and local environment, whether rural or urban, have been characterised by both approaches. Both views of marriage are largely from a male perspective and, given the sources, even that perspective is restricted to an educated elite male opinion. Optimists and pessimists alike tend to take it for granted that husbands either implemented their power over their wives to its full extent, or benevolently lessened it at their own whim. Yet this fails to take account of recent findings about manhood, reputation, patriarchy and the experience of the common law doctrine of coverture. Men did achieve status from their position in their household and domestic economy. Nonetheless, many had difficulties in achieving economic mastery, occupational independence, and full or unquestioned authority within the household and family, and their credit status was contingent upon many factors.<sup>56</sup> Equally, it ignores evidence that women's reputations rested upon a broader foundation than just chastity, drawing on their position as housewives, as well as their occupational status and charitable works.<sup>57</sup> It is also becoming clear that married women were less restricted in their daily lives than their status under coverture would indicate. Amongst other limitations, this left married women unable to own or manage personal and real property and prevented them from entering contracts. Yet numerous ordinary married women have been discovered organising their own property and participating in the commercial

<sup>53</sup> L. A. Pollock, "Teach her to live under obedience": the making of women in the upper ranks of early modern England', *Continuity and Change*, 4, 2 (1989), 233.

<sup>54</sup> Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*.

<sup>55</sup> L. A. Pollock, 'Rethinking patriarchy and the family in seventeenth-century England', *Journal of Family History*, 23, 1 (1998), 20.

<sup>56</sup> A. Shepard, 'Manhood, credit and patriarchy in early modern England c. 1580–1640', *Past and Present*, 167 (2000), 83–6.

<sup>57</sup> G. Walker, 'Expanding the boundaries of female honour in early modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (1996), 235–45.

world.<sup>58</sup> Such women would seem to have had greater control over their own lives than the pessimistic and optimistic models of marriage suggest. It is time, therefore, to reassess husbands' and wives' experiences of married life and their understandings of marital roles.

This book explores what marriage meant for husbands as well as wives and offers a new and more integrated model of married life. Chapter 2 describes the social and occupational diversity of the married couples in this study and the diverse urban, rural, industrial and agricultural conditions of the counties in which they lived. This provides useful information about marital experience outside London, which is all too readily considered unusual or atypical. Chapter 2 also outlines the book's methodology, which focuses on 'secondary complaints', instead of the primary accusations of cruelty or adultery, which provide the key to understanding everyday married life. The wide range of informal and formal methods of resolution that were on offer to couples experiencing marital difficulties are outlined in chapter 3 to reveal that many types of marital conflict were considered to be normal, not deviant, in order to facilitate reconciliation. As a result, records of marital difficulties provide invaluable evidence for historians to assess married life in all its forms. Chapters 4 and 5 turn to the central thesis of this book, which is that spouses' experiences were not wholly gendered, differing according to their sex, and that extensive co-dependency existed between them. Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate that both the marital power balance and the sexual double-standard were far more nuanced in practice than stereotypes might suggest. Finally the book turns to the previously unexplored issue of how spouses of different ranks, occupations and levels of wealth dealt with life after their marriages had collapsed. Chapter 8 reveals that while marital separation caused social dislocation and/or poverty for women, whatever their original social status, it also caused disruption to men's socio-economic status, which underlines the extent to which marital co-dependency extended its grip to husbands as well as wives.

<sup>58</sup> Bailey, 'Favoured or oppressed?'; Erickson, *Women and Property*; M. Finn, 'Women, consumption and coverture in England, c. 1760–1860', *Historical Journal*, 39, 3 (1996), 702–22; Shepard, 'Manhood, credit and patriarchy'.