



Joanne Bailey. *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England, 1660-1800.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xii + 244 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-81058-6.



Reviewed by Susannah Ottaway (Carleton College)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2006)

Family history, and particularly the history of marriage, has long been characterized by overly simplistic debates, such as that between optimists, who conceive of early modern marriage as companionate and relatively harmonious, and pessimists, who emphasize the detrimental impact of the double standard and patriarchy, especially on wives. Thankfully, Joanne Bailey's new book on marriage eschews these sterile debates for an approach to marriage that is both subtle and complex. Her emphasis throughout *Unquiet Lives* is on the co-dependency of marriage partners, and the importance of considering the material as well as the emotional life of wedlock.

After a remarkably concise introduction tracing the broad outline of historiographical debate on late medieval and early modern marriage, Bailey sets out her sources and methodology for studying marriage by focusing on the "secondary complaints" in records of marital conflict. These complaints indicate a "framework of acceptable and unacceptable marital behaviour" (p. 25). (By "secondary complaints" she means those beyond the initial allegations of cruelty, adultery, and desertion.) She uses matrimonial and correction suits for which cause papers survive from Durham, York, and Oxford ecclesiastical courts; records of Quarter Sessions from Northumberland, Newcastle, Durham, North Yorkshire, Bucking-

hamshire, and Oxfordshire; and public announcements by husbands from local newspapers in Newcastle, York, and Oxford. Beyond this already impressive array of sources, Bailey has done a significant amount of detective work in tracking down individuals and marriage relations through settlement records, overseers of the poor accounts, parish registers, etc. The result of all of this archival work is a database of 1,583 instances of conflict among 1,403 married couples from a wide range of social, economic, and regional backgrounds. Direct analysis of the database is presented in thirty tables in the appendices. Setting the quantitative material at the end of the book, in this way, may inconvenience readers who would like more opportunities to examine the author's evidence with her conclusions, but it also allows the book to progress in a more seamless narrative, rendering it more attractive to those not inured to the tradition of statistical and demographic family history.

Unquiet Lives examines both the expectations and perceptions of marriage and the actual experience of matrimony, and Bailey maintains an intense awareness of the tensions that existed between the experience and ideology of marriage. Overall, the picture of marriage that emerges is one in which there was hope for love or affection, which was believed to be a foundation for marriage, and a need for "quiet"—that is, living in harmony, where

each partner contributes to the household economy and domestic order to the best of their abilities. Despite significant regional variations in economy and society, people throughout England appear to have shared the same basic framework of expectations of marriage behavior. From the late seventeenth through the end of the eighteenth century, marriages were contracted and survived because of an equal attention to the pragmatic and emotional needs of both spouses, and Bailey consistently emphasizes the importance of material aspects of marriage in this work. Inevitably, in a setting of economic vulnerability, social tensions, and changing ideals of masculinity and femininity, many marriages failed to meet this ideal, and so it was an institution vulnerable to failure, violence, and disappointment. Bailey details the many informal and formal ways that such marital problems could be resolved, vividly depicting the network of connections that constituted neighborhoods and wider communities.

Wives and husbands who failed to live in harmony could turn to a wide variety of sources for help in either working out their problems or redressing their grievances: parish officers, justices of the peace, local lawyers, secular and ecclesiastical courts, kin, neighbors, servants, and friends—all of whom could play a role in solving the problems of discontented households. These solutions, in turn, encompassed a wide variety of resolutions for problems and punishments for misbehavior. Despite the patriarchal nature of eighteenth-century society, women were not always either victimized or marginalized within such disputes.

Emphasizing women's important functions within and outside of the household, Bailey argues that patriarchy was actually quite a flexible ideology when we look at it in the context of women's and men's lived experience within marriage. Thus in the book's fourth and fifth (and to my mind most important and compelling) chapters, Bailey shows that couples from all ranks of society depended on mutual assistance. Women certainly lived under real legal, social, economic, and cultural disabilities, and this book is rife with examples of specific problems that befell specific women because of their gender. However, thanks to the law of agency—which mitigated coverture by ensuring that women had the right to purchase necessities “suitable to the couple's situation in life” (p. 57)—and women's roles as workers, consumers, and property owners, wives were far from passive victims of coverture and the ideology of patriarchy. Their economic contributions, Bailey believes, gave women a sense of entitlement to their husband's assistance, and possibly even honor. At the same time, their contribu-

tions probably did not give women a real sense of power within the household, and they were still vulnerable to the physical abuse of their husbands, as the sixth chapter of the book shows. Despite their primacy as provisioners and property holders, men are depicted here as economically fragile; husbands were dependent on wives both for the maintenance of family honor and the viability of the household economy. In the end, “in the majority of marriages, these demands [of maintaining a household] involved both spouses' work and led to a marital relationship of co dependency” (p. 83).

Bailey's chapters on wife beating, the marital power balance, and marital chastity all emphasize the importance of changes over the eighteenth century. Shifting responses to marital violence reflected changing conceptions of femininity and masculinity, as well as the rise of sensibility. In particular, there was a transformation in ideas about the relationship of women to sex and violence in eighteenth-century culture, accompanied by a growing fear of men's (especially lower class men's) innately barbaric, violent tendencies. Important shifts in marital relations were thus linked to broader societal changes in this period. Similarly, attitudes towards adultery altered, becoming slightly more accepting of female unchastity and less accepting of men's, thereby lessening the imbalance of the double standard. The chapters portray male coercive power over their wives as limited and contingent. Thus, Bailey admits that “the hierarchical system of patriarchy did give limited license to dominant members of relationships to correct their subordinates with moderation in order to maintain order.” But, she adds, “most legal, religious and social authorities recognized that patriarchy contained the potential for men to abuse their power and sought to provide means to prevent this” (p. 113). This argument is consistent and compelling, but it does not lessen the effect of the disturbing images of battered women and dysfunctional households, sections of the legal cases Bailey has reproduced to show patriarchal abuses at their worst.

This is a deeply researched and carefully argued book, and it makes a very important contribution to both family and gender history. Bailey's work should be immediately influential among family historians, and it should generate much discussion among historians of gender. Indeed, in a field already rich with the subtle works of such authors as Margaret Hunt, Laura Gowing, and Anna Clark, Bailey stakes out her own ground and demands that we continue to reassess and render more nuanced our understanding of ideologies and experiences of patriarchy and gender relationships in the eighteenth century.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Susannah Ottaway. Review of Bailey, Joanne, *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England, 1660 1800*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11319>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.