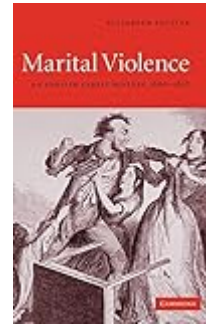


Elizabeth Foyster. *Marital Violence: An English Family History, 1660-1857.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xii + 282 pp. \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-61912-7; \$78.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83451-3.



Reviewed by Marjorie Levine-Clark (University of Colorado at Denver)

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The Longue Durée of Marital Violence

In this well-structured, clearly written text, Elizabeth Foyster challenges some of the central arguments in histories of domestic violence. Much of her analysis is informed by a conversation with the existing literature, whose conclusions she explicitly disputes. Using the rich documentation of marital violence in church and secular court records, supplemented by newspapers, government documents, and more private recordings in diaries and correspondence, Foyster presents convincing evidence of the need to rethink our assumptions about the impact of such things as the ideology of domesticity and increasing privatization on marital violence. Foyster foregrounds historical continuities in ideas about marital violence, women's agency in resisting violence from their husbands, the impact of marital violence beyond the marital couple, and an expansive definition of marital violence which goes beyond physical wife-beating.

Arguing against historians such as Martin Wiener and James Hammerton, Foyster claims that the history of marital violence from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century reveals more continuities than changes.[1] Wiener and Hammerton each identify a significant trans-

formation in the Victorian period in attitudes towards domestic violence, emphasizing a new intolerance towards violent expressions of masculinity. The Victorians, in this interpretation, introduced a model of moderate masculinity which influenced both ideas and practices of domestic violence. Foyster, by contrast, contends that, over the course of her period, people consistently stressed masculine moderation with regard to marital violence and condemned men who went too far. Men's violence towards their wives "was not always seen as deviant behavior, and could be viewed instead as a feature of a 'normal', functioning relationship" (p. 4), but a man who crossed the line to "cruel violence," which seriously undermined the health and welfare of a wife, was denounced by both the law and the community in the seventeenth century, as in the nineteenth. Cruel violence was not limited to beatings; Foyster importantly points out that it could also include depriving a woman of economic necessities, medicine, her children, and her community support.

Foyster also questions the idea that marital violence became increasingly private over her period. The cru-

elly violent husband was regularly exposed to community criticism and had his reputation called into question. The private practice of cruel violence signified a man who had lost control of himself and his household, and this private chaos was thought to translate into public inadequacies as well. Private and public lives were, and remained, intertwined. Foyster details the involvement of kin, friends, and neighbors in mediating marital violence and, in doing so, reveals fascinating evidence about men's relationships with their in-laws. Children, too, were intimately involved in their parents' marital disputes, and Foyster does an excellent job of situating marital violence within family history and revealing the limits to privacy, even within a household. She demonstrates that even as the cults of sensibility and domesticity shaped demands for privacy, a couple's marriage was still something which seemed to be open to the intervention of outsiders.

Although arguing primarily for continuities, Foyster does establish some key points of change. The first is that class became increasingly important in conceptualizing cruel violence. Foyster makes explicit the legal and cultural premise that tolerance for violence was relative to a woman's social status: "what was tolerable in one social class was cruel in another" (p. 79). With growing emphasis on the refinement and sensibility of the middle classes came a displacement of physical violence onto working men. No longer an issue for individual marriages and discrete couples, marital violence was another form of bad behavior connected to the working classes: a threat to the social order. It was something that had to be solved.

This call for a solution ties into the second major transformation Foyster identifies: communities began to turn to professionals such as the police, magistrates, doctors, and the clergy to address marital violence. Interestingly, Foyster details the tensions in this development, which was by no means complete at the end of her period. While some professionals criticized amateur responses to marital violence and argued that experts should handle the problem, others were less prepared to intervene in what had traditionally been an issue for families and communities. The significance of this transition, as Foyster eloquently argues, is that "when marital violence became somebody's problem, in terms of it lying within their professional expertise, it ceased to be everybody's problem. It is this change in attitudes that has cost so many women their lives" (p. 233). Thus the narrative of professionalization is more telling than that of privatization in Foyster's analysis, although the two seem to me to be interdependent.

Foyster makes clear the impact of gender and class expectations on the acceptance and treatment of marital violence. Women whose behaviors did not align with class and gender norms could be seen as deserving of violence, which could make it difficult to gain support for their claims. Women who did not meet standards of femininity were additionally sometimes blamed for their husbands' violent behavior; and they blamed themselves. Rather than being seen as victims, these less-than-ideal wives were the agents of their husbands' aggression. Yet simultaneously, Foyster argues, women could use ideals of femininity to critique their husbands' behavior: "evidence of unprovoked violence that had been met with patience, silence, sexual innocence or nervous illness was difficult for men to defend and was met with sympathy" (p. 127). Foyster does, however, acknowledge the limits of this kind of critique, stressing the weight of women's psychological internalization of their husbands' violent treatment.

Foyster's emphasis on women's resistance is a key theme in this text. In addition to passively resisting their husbands' violent behavior through embodying ideal femininity, women could meet violence with violence. Yet women's violence was never accepted in the way that men's violence was, precisely because it went against gender expectations. Women's violence signified a "world turned upside down" (p. 105), and like women's more passive responses, had its limits as a strategy of resistance. A violent wife threatened a husband's manhood, and his violent reaction to her violence could legitimately be anticipated as a way to restore order. While Foyster attempts through her discussion of resistance to demonstrate that women were not passive victims of marital violence, it is hard not to come away feeling like they had few options to counter abuse, maintain their reputations, or even maintain their lives. Their economic dependence upon marriage left women very little leeway in their protests, and power differentials constrained women's ability to resist their husbands' behavior in meaningful material or emotional ways.

I was not always persuaded by Foyster's change within continuity argument. In her efforts to make a historiographically provocative point, she perhaps overstates the extent of continuities, for the changes she identifies seem both significant and in agreement with existing arguments. It is not only the two large transformations with regard to class and professionalization that matter in this text; other consequential changes are sprinkled throughout, such as changes in women's "options for response to violence" (p. 85), including the ways

that changing ideas about femininity constrained the acceptability of women's use of anger (p. 111). Just as violence came to be associated with working-class men, so did vociferous protest become associated with working-class women. As Anna Clark has argued with reference to the decreasing ability of women to bring defamation claims so as not to seem too public and brash, so it seems that middle-class ideals of femininity inhibited women's ability to complain about men's violence. Perhaps contradictorily, the narrower version of femininity also meant that guilty men seemed all the more brutish in their abuse and gave women more power to contest verbal violence.[2]

Beyond the historiographical debates, Foyster has produced a text that truly communicates the tragedies of marital violence that speak all too familiarly to our present lives. One point which I found particularly poignant in this regard—and in reference to my own work—is Foyster's observation that concentrating on the causes of marital violence can be limiting. When histori-

ans focus on causation, "there is a danger of uncritically reproducing the arguments deployed by violent men to justify, defend, or at the very least excuse their behavior" (p. 4). Examining unemployment and alcoholism as causes for men's violence does not explain why they chose to vent their frustrations on their wives. There is much here to contemplate.

Notes

[1]. Martin J. Wiener, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and A. James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[2]. Anna Clark, "Whores and Gossips: Sexual Reputation in London, 1770-1825," in *Current Issues in Women's History*, ed. Arina Angerman, et al (New York: Routledge, 1989), 231-248.

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