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Bigamy and Christian Identity in Late Medieval Champagne. By Sara McDougall.


Bigamy and Christian Identity in Late Medieval Champagne is a successful example of how a small number of primary sources—in this case, bigamy prosecutions in fifteenth-century Troyes—can be usefully exploited by the medieval historian. Sara McDougall uses the surviving records of the officiality of Troyes to argue that there was a crisis of marriage in the later Middle Ages which was a precursor to how marriage would come to be debated and reshaped during the Reformation.

This is not a new argument, but whereas scholars such as Steven Ozment have theorized that this crisis was due to the Catholic Church’s espousal of celibacy or to the challenge which clandestine marriage posed to parental and ecclesiastical control over the institution, McDougall seeks a different origin. She posits instead that this crisis arose because Church-approved marriage had become so desirable that people were willing to commit bigamy, to conceal that they had abandoned their spouse or falsely claim that they had been widowed, in order to retain the benefits of the institution. McDougall also argues that other scholars working on late medieval and early modern marriage, such as Natalie Zemon Davis in her influential micro-history of a sixteenth-century bigamy case, The Return of Martin Guerre, have put too much weight on the concept of identity as an explanatory tool. McDougall admits that “distortions of identity” (135) mattered to late medieval Europeans, but argues for the primacy of Christian identity, rather than a concern with imposture, in explaining their vehement opposition to bigamy. Marriage was “always ideally a singular and exclusive event” (19) for medieval Christians, designed to resemble the two-in-one-flesh union of Adam and Eve and the symbolic marriage of Christ with the Church. By distorting earthly marriage, bigamists challenged this symbolism on a fundamental level.

After a short introduction setting out the book’s goals, the body of the text is divided into five chapters. The first looks at the legal, theological and cultural contexts of marriage in medieval Christian Europe. The second and third form a pair, examining the gendered differences in the treatment of bigamous men and women, who seem mostly to have come from middling families. Men were...
punished more frequently and more severely for bigamy than were women and
more publicly—many were exposed on the ladder leading to the town scaffold
before they were imprisoned. Women mostly escaped with a fine. McDougall
argues that this was because for a man to enter into a bigamous relationship
was for him to repudiate his role as a responsible patriarch, to abjure the model
set out for him by the self-denying St Joseph; for a woman to enter a bigamous
marriage, however, was more tolerated because it was considered natural for a
woman, by reason of the infirmity of her sex, to seek male headship. The fourth
chapter examines the reasons why people may have committed bigamy; the
sources do not allow us to know the motivations of most of those prosecuted,
but McDougall suggests that affective bonds or financial considerations were
the most likely ones. The fifth chapter discusses why civil and ecclesiastical
authorities prosecuted bigamists, and in particular why they regarded bigamy as
a crime on a par with heresy and violent assault. In particular, she considers the
men who made up the bishop’s court, men who were trained in theology or canon
law at Paris and Orléans, and traces the origins of the moralizing rhetoric which
they used when prosecuting bigamists. She sees in their words an overwhelming
desire for what they regarded as proper Christian social order. After the brief
conclusion, which summarizes the book’s argument through the lens of the con-
cept of Christian identity, there is a useful appendix of selected transcriptions of
bigamy cases from a register of the officiality.

McDougall skillfully combines a close reading of the legal records with an
awareness of the broader historical and cultural context—the inhabitants of fif-
teenth-century Champagne lived in a region ravaged by the Hundred Years’ War,
affected by plague and economic change and local political troubles; their ways
of thinking about the world were shaped by their exposure to sermons, scripture,
and literature. Her work is highly comparative, contrasting marriage disputes in
Troyes with similar cases across a swathe of Western Europe. If the officiality
of Troyes was unusual in the zeal with which it pursued bigamists during the
fifteenth century, then it is a clear harbinger of the conflicts over marriage which
would occupy so many during the Reformation. While perhaps McDougall
could have contrasted Christian marriage with Jewish and Muslim marriage
in medieval Europe, or considered more how the wishes and expectations of
the non-bigamous partner may have influenced the bigamous partner into mar-
rying in public, her work undoubtedly demonstrates the centrality of marriage to
Christian identity by the late Middle Ages.

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