

Family and Household in Medieval England

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This title will doubtless be welcomed by those who offer undergraduate classes on the history of the family. Medievalists have been quick to respond to the impression given by Philippe Ariès that medieval parents did not care about their children and to Lawrence Stone's argument that familial affectivity originated over the course of 'the early modern period' (1500-1800). However, as yet there has been no synthesis of such work akin to, say, Ralph A. Houlbrooke's *The English Family 1450-1700*. Fleming's book is a very different study, though, with both omissions and its own merits.

The study spans five centuries: from the Norman Conquest of 1066, with its 'transformation in England's political, legal and administrative systems' (p. 3) which had consequences for the family, to the 1520s, as the Reformation similarly brought about important religious, ideological and administrative changes. It focuses on England because, as Fleming rightly comments, different countries have 'their own peculiarities' (p.3) and the wealth of work which has already been done on the English experience renders this possible. For the purposes of the book Fleming says he is working with Stone's definitions of 'family' and 'household': 'those members of the same kin who live together under one roof' and 'persons living together under the same roof'. 'Kin' is defined, also in Stone's terms, as 'persons related by blood or marriage' (p. 2).

A brief introduction sets out Fleming's broad understanding of 'family' history. The family is an institution that has 'a reciprocal, dynamic relationship' (p. 1) with politics, the law, the economy, society, culture, religion and technology. While some of these factors are treated in more depth than others, the end product is a book that perhaps focuses more on the wider context of the family than on the family itself. The argument set out briefly at the end of this introduction does much to explain the subsequent foci of the book:

'... it can be argued that the family as we know it today, in many of its most important external attributes at least, owes more to the centuries covered in this book than to any other period. This

is particularly the case in the evolution of the process of marriage, and in the establishment of agreed laws of inheritance, but much of the ideology of the family - concerning the importance of consent and affection, for example - also received its definitive expression in this period.' (p. 4)

The first of three chapters is entitled 'Marriage Making'. It is here that Fleming gets to articulate his views about the evolution of marriage and the importance of consent. The first and longest subsection is 'Marriage in Theory and Law'. This begins with a useful summary of what the medieval conception of marriage took from three sources: Roman law, Judaeo-Christian scriptures and the writings of the early church fathers and Germanic customs. It then discusses the growth of clerical jurisdiction over marriage in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with the adoption of consent as the sole requirement for a valid marriage. Quite a lot of space is also devoted to outlining the various categories of impediments to marriage, to be enforced by church courts. This subsection can be viewed as typical of Fleming's style in this book: the writing is lucid but succinct; the different historiographic views are made evident but pointed comments reveal Fleming's own position, and examples from primary sources are used to illustrate points in a lively and engaging manner (sometimes translations from the Latin cited by scholars like Richard Helmholz, elsewhere from well-known letter collections or unpublished wills and Chancery petitions). Saints' lives, though, are used in a less sophisticated way as evidence of the incompatibility of family life and sainthood, rather than as ideological texts with their own agendas.

The other subsections in this first chapter are 'Age at First Marriage', 'Coercion and Freedom of Choice', 'Marriage Strategies', 'Marriage Settlements' and 'The Ordering of Marriage'. While all these sections are linked by the common theme of marriage, the treatment of the material - in terms of ordering and varying degrees of depth - results in a chapter that does not quite cohere, which is also my assessment of the book as a whole. The subsection 'Age at First Marriage' is brief. While it serves to introduce the concept of the northwest European marriage pattern, thought to be applicable to England from at least the late fourteenth century (over half way through Fleming's five centuries), many of the related issues raised here are not taken up, although they are explored later in the book, for example, the timing of inheritance (in Chapter Three) and family strategies (a separate subsection). As the book uses endnotes rather than footnotes, more explicit cross-referencing within the text would be helpful. 'Marriage Strategies', about how marriages might be arranged to suit wider family interests, focuses on the gentry and the mercantile elite. It is not clear, though, why it could not have been merged with the previous section, 'Coercion and Freedom of Choice', which considers how much independence peasants and townspeople, as well as the gentry, had to select partners. In some books subheadings allow the reader to pick and choose what they want to read about. In this one they often serve to aid the reader by breaking up the text, but I would caution that it is not always a book that one can just dip into (a problem, perhaps, if the key audience is an undergraduate one). The fifth subsection, 'Marriage Settlements', is more technical. It does not just discuss dowries, dower and jointure, but is one of the clearest explications I have read of legal customs surrounding property, such as enfeoffment to uses. 'The Ordering of Marriage', the last section of this chapter, is about the ritual of the marriage ceremony, beginning with the church line but moving on to 'clandestine marriages'. While this subsection is full of interesting examples, it might be confusing for the reader uninitiated in the laws on medieval marriage. Fleming appears both to set up a disjunction between church ceremonies and 'irregular unions' (p. 46), and to argue that informal exchanges of vows might be the first stage in a marriage 'process' that ends in church solemnisation. The latter is also a view put forward in the book's conclusion but it might have been more helpful earlier in this subsection.

The second chapter is entitled 'Family Life' and is the one that most closely focuses on the 'family', working with the definition 'those members of the same kin who live together under one roof'. It is also the shortest chapter. It again has six subsections: 'Husbands and Wives'; 'Parents and Children'; 'Family Size'; 'Leaving Home'; 'Servants', and 'Kinship'. Not only does Fleming start with the married couple, he starts with emotions. As he himself states, there are problems in finding such evidence for this period. He therefore discusses in turn the literature of courtly love, religious writings on sexual intercourse and love (it is here that he argues the importance of affection), the Paston letters, the writings of Christine de Pisan, advice

books for the elite and wills. The section then looks back to arranged marriages (Chapter One) and forward to the buying and selling of wardships (Chapter Three), before discussing marital violence, celibacy and adultery. This variety of material and topics is covered in less than seven pages (whereas 'Wardship', a narrower subject, gets more than eight pages in the next chapter). The following subsection, 'Parents and Children' is similar: Fleming swiftly moves through different ages of responsibility, childbirth and baptism, nursing, acquisition of gender roles, parental discipline, affection and distrust. It is in the three paragraphs on gender roles that we get one of the book's few references to the household economy. The account, which argues that girls spent more time in the home environment in contrast with the males who worked in the fields, is heavily dependent on Barbara Hanawalt's interpretation of coroners' rolls which has not gone unchallenged. While Fleming admits that 'much more could be said about the household as an economic unit' (p. 3), which he excuses with reference to lack of space, some consideration of the household economy might have enabled Fleming to offer a fuller picture of the relations between husbands and wives. While affection, sex, the law and property were doubtless important elements in marriage, so too would have been the day-to-day tasks which both performed, either separately or together.

The third section in this chapter, entitled 'Family Size', begins with a consideration of the evidence for the size of households but moves on to life expectancy, contraception and abortion. It is only at the end of this subsection that Fleming returns to the difference between 'family' and 'household' which he articulated in the Introduction. A 'household' could include persons other than kin such as servants and lodgers. This serves as a link to the next two subsections, although it is not clear why the two pages on 'Leaving Home' are separated from the three and a half that follow entitled 'Servants'. The latter section is worth reading for what it has to say on aristocratic service, although the compression of views on urban service lead to the following 'non sequitur': 'In towns at least most of these female servants, particularly from the mid-fifteenth century, were probably employed as unskilled general domestics rather than as workers in crafts or trades. The greater opportunities for employment may in turn have presented young women with a more attractive alternative to marriage.' P. J. P. Goldberg, who Fleming cites, rather argues that it was before women were forced out of skilled artisan work that employment as a servant - where one might learn such skills - was an attractive option. The second chapter then ends with the brief subsection, 'Kinship', which treats relevant vocabulary, extended families, kin conflicts, and gender and status differences.

The third and final chapter is called 'The Dissolution of Marriage and its Consequences'. This is perhaps a strange choice of title as it only relates to the first two of five subsections: the brief 'Annulment and Separation', which refers back to canonical impediments, and 'Widows and Widowers', the longest subsection in the book. The latter inevitably deals more with widows than widowers. Initially the emphasis is on law and property. Dower disputes with sons or stepsons, for example, are used to illustrate the problems widows had in gaining property rather than for what they reveal about familial relationships. Again, though, Fleming is very good at explaining clearly legal customs and processes. The debate about whether widowhood brought about more 'freedom' for women - while considering, for example, work and guilds - is marred by virtue of being compared with the sketchy picture of married life discussed above. The rest of this chapter concerns 'Wardship', 'Inheritance' and 'Retirement'. In all three the focus is on property. Wardship is brought about by the death of a father, which is perhaps why this section follows that on widowhood although it has clearer links to the sections dealing with parent-child relations and arranged marriages. 'Inheritance' also follows from a death but the emphasis here is on inheritance systems. 'Retirement' has an old-age link but is about whether children took responsibility for looking after their elderly parents, a topic touched on in 'Leaving Home' (Chapter Two).

A brief conclusion does not bring these disparate topics together but does outline Fleming's key beliefs, although not all are ones fully explicated within the study. Indeed, the book ends with a call to those 'attempting to write the history of family relations, approaching the most private and intangible of human experiences' to 'always remember that what they are working with are the shadows left by real flesh and blood human beings' (p. 127). I do not dispute this sentiment, and Fleming does gesture elsewhere in the study to the emotions that might lie behind people's actions, but I do not think that this is where the strength of the book lies. Chapter Two, where the personnel of the family or household and their relationships are

predominantly dealt with, is the sketchiest part of the book. Fleming seems at his most confident and assured when dealing with the 'external attributes': laws concerning marriage, property and inheritance and how the wider kin group and ideas of lineage might impact on these. It is his situating of the family within a political and legal context which makes the study a significant one. Discussions of gentle and noble families often have a similar emphasis, but in this book Fleming attempts to put the experiences of all levels of medieval society within such a frame.

The information given in Chapter Two can be supplemented with previous publications that consider aspects of the life-cycle and family life in medieval England, many of which originated from a women's history perspective. This study, though, offers - not only to the student but also to those working on aspects of the medieval family from a social history perspective - a broader frame of reference which does much to wrest the family from the confines of the home. Much of my criticism has been with the lay out and structuring of the book. The 'life-cycle' approach, heralded on the back of the book, is not sustained but only because this does not seem to be Fleming's key interest. There is doubtless a need for this broader study if we want students to understand many of the ways in which the medieval family differs from the modern. Indeed, it is heartening to realise that those who work on the history of the medieval family are no longer constrained by the need to respond to modernist representations of the medieval family as 'other' but can feel free to explore the period's distinctive elements as Fleming admirably does in this book.

The only typographical error found was on p. 69 in the clause 'sodomy (defined as any form of penetration other than virginal)'; the latter word should doubtless read 'vaginal'.

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