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The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain 1400?1900

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In recent decades, the fields of women's and gender studies have rapidly expanded. In trying to understand women's roles in past societies, historians have paid particular attention to issues surrounding marriage, family, and the household. This volume seeks to expand the discussion of women's places in early modern northern-European societies by focusing on the institution of marriage and its role in economic activities. Arising out of a series of conferences sponsored by the Swedish Research Council, this work contains fifteen articles by historians from throughout the British Isles, Scandinavia, and Canada.

To address the connections between the institution of marriage and the larger economy, this work explores three different phases of marital activities, namely forming the partnership, managing the partnership, and dissolving the partnership. The book begins with an introduction by Amy Louise Erickson where she provides a comparative overview of marital economic activities throughout northern Europe. This article is of particular importance because Erickson provides a clear and concise discussion of the similarities and differences between the economic, cultural, societal, and legal norms and expectations surrounding marriages in the British Isles and Scandinavia. In doing so, she provides a truly northern-European perspective which sets this work apart from others that focus more narrowly on a particular country or region.

The book next examines topics dealing with the formation of the marriage partnership. This section

particularly focuses upon the legal ramification of courtships and the economic negotiations that took place before a marriage was concluded. Hanne Marie Johansen and Catherine Frances examine consistory court records in Norway and north-west England to discuss the legal consequences of the breakdown of betrothals. By making extensive use of court records both authors convincingly argue that during the seventeenth century women successfully sued men who had broken their engagements. Johansen found that such ideas began to change in Norway during the eighteenth century with the growing popularity of pietism which sought to regulate more highly marriage practices, and with the greater acceptance of natural law theory which emphasised an individual's ability to break unacceptable contracts. These changes in attitudes were reflected in the passing of new laws which weakened women's abilities to successfully seek compensation from the courts for broken engagements. In contrast, Frances concluded that women who sued men over the breakdown of betrothals experienced the greatest success when they received the support of the families involved. This idea challenges the theory that because of work opportunities outside of the home, young people did not need the financial or emotional support of their families when concluding a marriage.

The rest of the section examines the economic negotiations surrounding the establishment of marriages. Gudrun Andersson investigates the practice of transferring property at the beginning of a marriage among the merchant elite in the Swedish town of Arboga, Anu Pylkkänen studies the acquisition of marital property among the peasantry in Finland, and Jane Whittle examines the abilities of servants in rural England to earn enough money to establish their own households. In Sweden and Finland, the authors found that women played vital roles in the transfer and maintenance of family property. According to Andersson, because men and women who lived in Swedish town received equal inheritances, both sexes played important roles in maintaining a family's position within society. Thus the marriage of a daughter often provided a means to secure or advance a family's societal position. Similarly to Andersson, Pylkkänen concludes that women in the Finnish countryside played important roles in the maintenance and transfer of family property. In the rural setting, however, it was the economic importance of women's work that gave them influence in familial strategies regarding the disposition of property. In England, Whittle found that for many young people a period of working as a servant was often a means to acquire the skills and assets needed to establish an independent household. Through studying servants' wages, Whittle found that while individuals could earn enough money to buy a small cottage, only those who inherited property could experience social mobility.

In the second section, Hilde Sandvik, Inger Dübeck, Rosemarie Fiebranz and Ann-Catrin Östman explore how couples managed issues that occurred during their marriages such as property management, household roles, and the family's economic activities. Sandvik and Dübeck provide overviews of the development of Norwegian and Danish matrimonial law during the early modern period. In both articles the authors show that women regularly engaged in trade without their husband's consent and had a say in the selling of their inherited property even though such activities were technically illegal. Of the two articles, Sandvik makes a more convincing argument because of her use of a variety of sources including legal documents, court records, and land registries, which illustrate how practice deviated from the legally prescribed norms. Dübeck's article is not nearly as satisfying because she only describes changes in Danish matrimonial law during the early modern period, but does not analyse why these changes occurred. Fiebranz and Östman compare changing societal attitudes about the division of labour in rural households in Sweden and Finland. Through a discussion of marital cases in northern Sweden, Fiebranz illustrates that women could act independently when the economic wellbeing of their family was threatened. In comparison, Östman studied a series of letters between a husband and wife written in the late 1800s to show how couples negotiated familial expectations and roles. While Fiebranz and Östman both raise interesting issues about why marital conflicts occurred and how couples tried to resolve such conflicts, their conclusions are limited by the very narrow focus of their source material. Neither author explores in detail how representative their case studies are of the larger society, which gives their articles an insular quality.

In the third section, which concerns dissolving the partnership, Hanne Marie Johansen, Elizabeth Ewan, Anges S. Arnórsdóttir, and Maria Ågren discuss the economic impact of the end of marriages including the consequences of divorce, separation, and death. Hanne Marie Johansen examines economic issues surrounding divorce in early modern Norway. Through examining consistory court records, Johansen

describes the reasons behind the granting of divorces and the splitting up of familial assets. While she hints at issues such as the upsurge in divorces around 1800, the government's concern to prevent divorced women from becoming financial burdens on their local communities, and the greater accessibility of divorce to people from all levels of society than was found in other parts of Europe, Johansen never fully addresses these points. The article provides interesting insight into the mechanics of how divorces occurred, but does not fully engage with the larger societal impact of divorce.

From different perspectives, Ewan, Arnórsdóttir, and Ågren consider inheritance and the maintenance of the surviving widow or widower after their spouse's death. Ewan analyse how urban elites in Scotland made provisions to provide for the economic welfare of widows, Arnórsdóttir investigates the practice of gift giving in late-medieval Iceland that was used to give financial support to illegitimate children, and Ågren looks at how families made decisions about the transfer of property to the next generation through an investigation of land transactions involving two farms in northern Sweden. Ewan and Arnórsdóttir provide very descriptive accounts of strategies that families used to give financial support to widows and illegitimate children. While their studies add details to our general knowledge of property transfers, they provide little new insight into how or why such decisions were made. In comparison, Ågren's article suggests new insight into the importance of property transfers between generations. Although her study is very narrowly focused on two farms in northern Sweden, Ågren successfully uses this micro-study to investigate the larger issue of the growth of individualism and self-interest among young people in Sweden during the nineteenth century. Through a detailed analysis of the land transactions involving the two farms, Ågren concludes that prior to the nineteenth century young people appeared to be more self-sacrificing because they had few economic options that allowed them to act independently. In the nineteenth century when new economic opportunities developed within Sweden and expanded opportunities to emigrate to America were created, more members of the younger generation lived independently of their families, thus creating an impression of greater individualism. In the article, Ågren convincingly argues against the idea that the nineteenth century saw the development of more selfish and self-centered attitudes among Swedish youth. Instead she concludes that greater economic opportunities allowed young people to pursue their own interests.

The book concludes with a discussion of how modern economic theory has traditionally disregarded marriage as a primary economic institution. After looking at various European economic theories written between 1500 and 1800, Michael Roberts concludes that during the early modern period economics were usually defined as political economics and thus focused on connections between economic activities and that state. Considerations of familial and household economic activities would have fallen outside of the economic discourse of the era. Roberts rightly points out that what the essays in this volume suggest is a new definition of economics, which encompasses many aspects of economic activities. He ends by stating that what is lacking is a comprehensive discussion of the marital economy throughout northern Europe, but that perhaps many small, local studies provide the means to create a larger picture. This sentiment expresses both the greatest strength and greatest weakness of this work. While taken together the articles provide a detailed picture of the economic impact of marriage upon families and women in particular, their scattered geographical focus and scattered time focus leave large holes in the discussion. Additionally, many of the articles narrowly focus on the specific issues under examination and do not link the impact of the marital economy to larger societal or political issues. For example, discussions of how the constant state of warfare and the massive depopulation among rural communities in Sweden and Finland during the seventeenth century impacted on marital economics or how the religious and political radicalism of the middle decades of the seventeenth century in the British Isles influenced familial economic decisions would have been useful to address. Despite these shortcomings, the articles are very valuable in providing details about marital economics and the inter-workings of forming, managing and dissolving marriages during the early modern period.

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