

## Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society

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**Reviewer:**

Ruth Mazo Karras

Quite a lot of work on the history of marriage is based on assumptions that reflect the authors' views about contemporary society: either that marriage is necessary for an ordered society and that anything that strengthens it is good, or that marriage is oppressive to women. Knowing nothing personal about the author other than the dedication to his *uxor carissima*, I guessed that this might fall into the former category: another romantically favourable book about marriage. D'Avray's book, however, is a systematic attempt to determine what medieval people, not modern ones, thought about marriage, and is remarkably free of assumptions based on present-day debates. (Indeed, the organisation of this book and its argument is so structured, and so dependent upon explicit logic rather than rhetorical flourishes, that one wonders whether he may in fact be reacting to previous work that expressed too much of the authors' personal views about marriage.) And whereas much of the scholarship on marriage confuses it with household and family formation (which was possible without marriage), d'Avray is clearly concerned with marriage itself as a religious and social institution.

The basic argument of the book is that the religious symbolism of marriage, communicated to a wide audience through sermons, had a significant impact on social and legal practice. The argument proceeds in several logical steps. First, d'Avray demonstrates on the basis of manuscript evidence that sermons on marriage were widely known and, presumably, preached. He then looks at individual aspects of marriage, and the way the use of marriage in sermons as a symbol for Christ's relation to the church or for God's relation to the soul may have affected the way communities of listeners understood these aspects.

D'Avray's first chapter, entitled 'Mass Communication,' is the most significant in the book because its implications go far beyond the study of marriage. His argument here, following up on his previous book *Medieval Marriage Sermons*

, is that the model sermon manuscripts that survive are the tip of the iceberg: they once circulated in far greater numbers. He shows that vast numbers of manuscripts were destroyed around 1,500 to make bindings for other books; that the number of mendicant houses would have required a much greater number of sermon manuscripts than those that we have today; that many books circulated without belonging to a particular library and there is hence no record of them; and that many sermon compilations circulated in ephemeral forms. He also argues that some *pecia* exemplars were so over-used that they had to be recopied, indicating a much greater number of manuscripts than survive today. All this is true of other sorts of manuscripts as well, not only sermon; but because sermons were delivered orally to large audiences, they benefited from a 'multiplier' effect. Although actual quantification is not possible, d'Avray suggests that far fewer than one in ten manuscripts has survived; perhaps only one in fifty, or even fewer. He is quite right to say that his arguments 'relativize the whole notion of the print revolution' (p. 41).

D'Avray also suggests that these sermon manuscripts were often copied by those who intended to use them, rather than by commercial scribes. The variants he finds, not scribal errors but deliberate changes, indicate that the copyist was thinking about the material. He does not use this argument to prove that the sermons represented mass communication, but rather to show how the production of the vast quantities of manuscripts he posits would have been possible.

D'Avray's argument about the sermon as mass communication rests on an assumption that may be questioned. Repetition of a message works, he says, citing the example of modern advertising. It is true that repeated messages often have an impact on people, but it is not true of all messages. Some messages – like 'do not litter' – are repeated precisely because they have not yet had an impact. Historians often argue that the repetition of a message means that the repeater assumes the audience needs to get the message – in other words, that an injunction to do X means that not-X is currently the case. D'Avray, on the other hand, argues that the repetition of X means that people eventually come to believe or do X. Market research indicates that neither claim is true across the board for a modern audience, and given that 'mass communication' in the medieval world was so different from in the modern, we cannot assume that either is *a priori* true for a medieval audience.

D'Avray also assumes that the impact that the repeated message would have was to change the way people thought about marriage (the symbol) rather than about, say, the union between God and the church (the symbolised). The impact, however, could as easily have flowed the other way. If the familiar is used as a metaphor for the abstract and unfamiliar, it is more likely to change the way the audience thinks about the latter than the way it thinks about the former. D'Avray notes this at the beginning – 'Marriage is one of the strongest experiences in many people's lives. Comparison with marriage is a way of conveying the strength of the bond between God and humanity' (p. 17) – but then goes on to argue that the comparison in fact strengthened marriage itself. He suggests (p. 7) that there is a strong correlation between cultures with highly developed marriage symbolism and those with indissoluble marriage. This might be because the use of marriage symbolism for divine bonds strengthens the human bonds used as symbol, but it might also be because indissoluble marriage is more likely to be used as a symbol for a divine bond than a less permanent relationship. An image of 'the soul who, forgetful of her engagement ring, does not keep the faith of marriage, when women as a rule keep their engagement ring throughout their life' (p. 62) is not attempting to change the listeners' view of betrothal, it is trying to work with an image that the listener already has to develop an understanding of the soul.

Of course, the conveyance of meaning through symbolism works both ways: both the sign and the signifier may be understood in a new way. D'Avray argues that although marriage was important in medieval society, it was preaching that sacralised it from the mid thirteenth century on. Here it is not so much the use of marriage as a symbol in sermons that is at issue, but the explicit preaching of the religious nature of marriage and its goodness. The thirteenth century developed a delivery system – mendicant sermons – for bringing this message to the masses. But the use of marriage symbolism to understand the divine would seem to require that the message about the sacral nature of marriage had already been absorbed, rather than being a way of transmitting that message. Social practice and cultural representations clearly influence each other, on the subject of marriage as well as other subjects, in the Middle Ages as well as other periods. D'Avray

gives priority to symbolism, which he says had to be notably strong to overcome many people's wish to change spouses.

The next three chapters focus on indissolubility, bigamy, and consummation. For each of these topics he gives a brief history of the development of the church's doctrine and shows how people's ideas and behaviour were influenced by the ubiquity of marriage symbolism. Marriage symbolism has a role even before the heyday of mendicant sermons: for example, Hincmar of Reims uses Christ's marriage with the church to discuss why the marriage of Stephen of Auvergne was invalid (p. 46).

With regard to the indissolubility of marriage, d'Avray links it to the development of clerical celibacy: whereas secular rulers may wish to have several wives or concubines, either simultaneously or serially, when the power to control marriage falls into the hands of men who may not marry they are not likely to be sympathetic to these wishes. But the rationale presented for the indissolubility of marriage, he argues, was that it mirrored the union of Christ and the church, which was permanent. The juxtaposition of the sermons using this symbolism, and the shift in court practice to the indissolubility of marriage, is suggestive. It is not, however, definitive. The number of people who did try to get out of a marriage (as evidenced by the very court cases which d'Avray cites) indicates that not everyone lived the symbolism.

The discussion of bigamy is a bit different because bigamy was not illicit, as was the dissolution of a marriage. (By bigamy d'Avray means not simultaneous marriage to two people, but the remarriage of a widow or widower.) Remarriage was acceptable for a lay person, if frowned upon in some circles. However, a widower who wished to become a priest could not do so if he had had more than one wife, or if his wife had not been a virgin when he married her. Canonists held that a bigamist could not symbolise Christ, because that would mean dividing the Word made flesh. Medieval authors, d'Avray shows, recognised that in one sense this was illogical, since there was no sin in remarriage. But the symbolism was paramount, and outweighed the disadvantage of preventing a man from becoming a priest for a reason that did not involve sin. (One might make the analogy, although none of the sources d'Avray cites did so, of a man who cannot become a priest because of some congenital physical imperfection, which is not his doing but nevertheless keeps him from standing in for Christ.) This chapter begs the question of *why*, as d'Avray puts it, 'the rationality of marriage symbolism was the basis of a casuistry of "bigamy" cases' (p. 140). In the case of indissolubility, one might imagine that the symbolism was a rationalisation, rather than a cause, of the indissolubility doctrine, which could have emerged for other reasons. In the case of bigamy, those reasons are harder to see. For that reason, this chapter makes the stronger case that the symbolic meaning of marriage really stood in a causal relation to actual practice – not that the symbolism necessarily always provided the actual impetus, as d'Avray says of bigamist clergy in minor orders who were removed from their positions, but it 'provided the rationale for the new clear line that was drawn and determined its contours' (p. 162). In this case he is persuasive that 'the symbolism is not just epiphenomenal, not merely a surface coating: it has affected the meaning of marriage' (p. 154).

The subject of consummation would seem to be a difficult one for marriage symbolism: one does not imagine God having sexual intercourse with the soul, or Christ with the church. But some medieval writers believed that consummation was necessarily to create a complete and permanent marriage, even after the triumph of Peter Lombard's position that consent makes marriage over that of Gratian which required intercourse to ratify marriage. The idea that Mary and Joseph's marriage was somehow incomplete, which is present in Gratian, did not disappear. And in practice, a marriage that had not been consummated was easier to dissolve (for example, to enable entrance into a monastery) than one that had; d'Avray argues that symbolism was crucial to the development of the right to break a non-consummated marriage. This chapter, with cases from the registers of the papal penitentiary, brings the social experience of medieval people to the foreground in a way that the other chapters (where the legal material is derived from the work of other scholars) do not.

D'Avray's conclusion contains one problematic disclaimer. Because the 'Church as bride of Christ is composed of men as well as women' and the 'soul as bride of Christ is the soul of a man as much as the soul of a woman,' d'Avray argues, gender is 'somewhat peripheral to [these texts'] principal significance' (pp.

201–2). On the contrary, the gendered nature of the symbolism is key. If symbolism influences social practice, and in the symbolism the bridegroom is divine while the bride is a human institution or soul, surely one of the effects on social practice would have been the reinforcement of the husband's authority within the marriage. On the other hand, casting men in the position of the bride of Christ tells us something about how the church understood masculinity, and the kinds of conflicts that developed between clerical and secular masculinities.

Although I have my doubts about some of the conceptual leaps necessary to reach d'Avray's broader conclusions, his arguments on specific points are entirely convincing. He knows this material better than anyone, and he has taken care to set it out so that the reader can evaluate the argument. The appendix of documents, eighty pages of newly edited material from sermons, canon law quaestiones, letters and court cases is very valuable. The fact that the documents are not translated, as well as with the general tone of the book, indicate that the appropriate audience is a specialist one. Anyone with a serious interest in medieval marriage, or medieval sermon studies, or indeed the transmission of knowledge in the Middle Ages, will need to read it.

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[2]

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