

Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England

Review Number:

686

Publish date:

Sunday, 31 August, 2008

Author:

Cordelia Beattie

ISBN:

9780199283415

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£45.00

Pages:

191pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Amy Froide

The history of single women in pre-modern Europe has begun to attract a good amount of attention in the last decade. Thanks to historians such as Judith Bennett, Kim Phillips, Ruth Mazo Karras and P. J. P. Goldberg, we now have some knowledge about single women in medieval England, particularly about their working lives, their youth, their sexuality and contemporary attitudes toward them. (1) Beattie herself has also been contributing to the scholarship on the topic for the last few years, and her work has so far stood out for her ability to find the choice vignette and to provide lively stories from the historical records. Since many of her articles have appeared in edited collections, not all readers may be familiar with her work, and this monograph gives new readers a chance to engage with Beattie's arguments. As Beattie is the first to admit, her book is more about how medieval people classified women by marital status, rather than about single women *per se*. This work places Beattie firmly among those doing some of the most interesting theorising about singleness in the past.

This monograph provides a window into medieval English ideas about marital status and theories of categorisation, rather than a social history of the women being categorised. The book is a series of case studies in which Beattie examines the categorisation of single women in varying contexts and by different groups. Specifically, she looks at the classification of single women in religious texts, tax subsidies and guild records, as well as in civic and probate documents. Beattie's understanding of a range of medieval sources is truly impressive here. Already known as an attentive reader of sources and genres, Beattie is at pains to show the reader the nuances of each type of record that she uses. The downside of this it that she includes long explanations of documents and how historians have read them before we get to her interesting

analysis. Nevertheless, her presentation of the debates on and the caveats attendant in using religious texts, tax records, guild records and court documents will be very useful for postgraduates studying medieval history.

One of the key themes of Beattie's book is how we as scholars should define the category 'single women'. While in my own work on early modern England I found the word 'singlewoman' to mean a woman who has never married, Beattie argues that the same term had more varied connotations in the medieval period. (2) In one context - the 1413 Statute on Additions [Titles] - the term 'single women' included never-married women and sometimes widows, in essence women without husbands. Nevertheless, in the same time period but in a different context - penitential discourses on chastity - contemporaries could use the term to only mean never-married women. I am persuaded by Beattie's argument that the term 'single women' had varying meanings depending on the context; but, as Beattie herself shows, the term 'widow' gained wide acceptance in various types of records over the medieval period, and I would argue this is why 'single women' eventually came to mean unmarried women who were not widows, e.g. never-married women. Beattie argues strongly that her definitions come out of the sources, and that others who have worked on single women have created modern classifications into which they have inserted women in the past. This is a tad ungenerous and overstated, since, for instance, my use of the compound term 'singlewoman' comes directly from the sources as well. But Beattie's point that we must pay attention to nuance and difference and not generalise about the meanings of terms over time is well taken.

Beattie's attention to language and nuance is important, but as she shows us, language was a tricky thing in the Middle Ages. When sorting out just who was being classified and what terms were being used, she has to take into account Latin, law French, and English words. I wanted some more discussion of how we can know what groups of women contemporaries were classifying when they used the Latin term *sola*, which she translates into the English 'single'. And the same goes for the term *soluta*. These terms are even less transparent than English ones.

The book also makes an interesting and persuasive contention about medieval views of the sexuality of single women. Beattie particularly takes issue with Ruth Mazo Karras's contention that 'there was no conceptual space in the medieval scheme of things for a sexually active singlewoman who was not a prostitute'. (3) Her reading of the same preacher's manual to which Karras referred, the *Fasciculus Morum* ('Little Bundle of Morals'), shows that while the text defined fornication as intercourse with widows, prostitutes or concubines, it did not rule out the possibility of non-virginal and never-married women that did not fit into the above three categories. While it is always difficult to argue a point based on absence of overt evidence, Beattie once again reminds us of the nuances of language. Beattie's assertion that medieval people had more categories for single women than just virgin and whore is on firmer ground in her reading of *Jacob's Well*, a discourse on the 14 degrees of lechery. The text refers to maydens [virgins], wydewes, comoun wommen [prostitutes], and syngle wommen. Beattie interprets this as meaning that there was a classification for unmarried women who were not virgins, widows or prostitutes. I could suggest a counter interpretation: that the term 'syngle wommen' here may also refer to older never-married women who were no longer viewed as maydens or young women in a pre-marital state. This points to one of Beattie's key contentions: language is open to interpretation. However, since this is a text on sexuality, I think Beattie is probably correct that women were here being categorised by sexual and marital status and not by age or life cycle.

Beattie's chapter on how single women appear in the 1379 poll tax revisits previous work she has done that usefully reminds us of the socially constructed nature of supposedly transparent and formulaic sorts of documents like tax returns. Some used the Latin terms *solus/sola*, *vidua*, and *puella* (which Beattie translates as single, widow, and maiden/girl, respectively). Other returns made more use of occupational, familial or household terms, such as daughter or servant, to categorise single women. Beattie shows that assessors seem to have used *puella* to indicate a daughter at home in contrast to 'servant' for a young woman working outside the home. She argues that the terms *puella* and *vidua* both had an economic inflection; in the first case, of financial dependence, and in the second, of financial assessment according to the deceased husband's status. This chapter also brings up the issue that there were regional variations in the terms used

by tax assessors for single women. I would have liked much more of a discussion on Beattie's part about geographical, regional, or local variations (if any) in how contemporaries categorised single women. It seems integral to her book's argument that language and the meaning of terms and categories varied by context. Since Beattie makes use of sources from all over England - London, Bishops (now Kings) Lynn, Norwich and York - she does not confine herself to the meanings created by contemporaries in only one region, such as the southeast, for instance. More on this would have been interesting.

In the next chapter, Beattie examines the appearance of single women in 14th-century guild returns, registers and account books. Even though the guilds in question are religious and not craft organisations, she finds that the categories of 'single woman' and 'single sister' have an economic and legal inflection and she argues they are analogous to the legal category of *femme sole*, a legally and economically independent woman. Beattie also points out that the references to single women in guild records do not necessarily mean these women were members in any numbers. For example, a return that said a woman could join if she paid a certain fee, only means she could theoretically join the guild, for in reality the fee may have been too high for most women. While wives also appeared in guild records, they paid a lower fee than single women, and their husbands were the actual payees.

Beattie found that other guild records preferred to use terms for single women that had moral (rather than economic) associations and that evoked chastity. In guild registers, for instance, the latin terms *virgo* and *puella* are always used for young single women. There was no term for a young man that had associations of virginity, rather, the Middle English word 'sengilmen' appeared. Beattie describes the use of 'sengilman' as a vernacular shift in the later 15th century, but it is not clear why *virgo* did not undergo a similar vernacular shift to 'maiden'. Beattie makes a significant point when she argues that contemporaries had a vested interest in labelling young women 'maidens' and thus emphasising their chastity, while young men were described in neutral terms as 'sengilmen'. But since this argument is important it probably merited its own chapter and a longer disposition.

In the last chapter of the book Beattie examines the term 'single woman' as a personal designation in court records and probate documents. She argues that the growing use of the term 'single woman' was influenced by the actions of the central government, in particular the 1413 Statute of Additions, which attempted to standardise personal additions in legal documents. The justices decided the term 'singlewoman' was an appropriate addition for unmarried women. But since the term *vidua* continued to be used for widows, 'singlewoman' was largely applied to the never-married. Beattie attributes the introduction of the term 'singlewoman' into English society to the 1413 Statute since the earliest uses of this vernacular term that she can find come afterwards - in the 1430s and 1440s. She says the term only came to be widely used in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, and it operated as a variant of maiden rather than widow. This chronology is in line with what I have found and it helpfully provides a context for why 'singlewoman' is one of the words for never-married women in the legal documents of the early modern period. Beattie does take issue with my assertion that there was a transition in the 17th century from using the word maiden to using 'singlewoman', or its more common counterpart, 'spinster'. She, I think correctly, argues for more complexity, saying any transition occurred in different records, at different places and at different times, and that sometimes the change was from singlewoman back to maiden, instead of the direction I posited. Since I based my argument on probate and civic records from Southampton, Bristol, Oxford and York, I think Beattie is right that we might be seeing variations over region and record. Ultimately though, by the 17th and definitely by the 18th centuries, the terms 'maiden' and 'virgin' are outmoded and largely unused in English legal, civic, and economic records (although still apparent in literary genres).

Beattie's arguments for the late medieval period help me understand how much more single women were defined and classified within a secular context in the early modern era, compared to a more religious context in medieval England. With the Reformation and the disappearance of vowed virgins or nuns, as well as the increasing secularisation of both English society and its records, contemporaries eschewed the use of terms with virginal and religious connotations to classify women. Rather, the terms with economic and legal inflections, such as 'spinster' and 'singlewoman' dominate by the end of the 17th century. Beattie's final

chapter is a great example of how the work of medievalists can assist historians of more recent centuries to contextualise their own work. While Beattie has written her book for a specialist medieval audience, I hope historians of gender and of later periods will also take a look. They will be rewarded with an example of how to do careful social and cultural history that never strays from the sources but that also offers a fruitful analysis of those same documents.

Notes

1. *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. J. M. Bennett and A. M. Froide (Philadelphia, 1999); K. M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270-1540* (Manchester, 2003); R. Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1998) and see note 3; and P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Lifecycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520* (Oxford, 1992). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A. M. Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. M. Karras, 'Sex and the singlewoman' in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. J. M. Bennett and A. M. Froide (Philadelphia, 1999), p. 104. [Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

oxford journals

<http://ahr.oxfordjournals.org/content/114/1/195.1.full> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/686>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3661>

[2] <http://ahr.oxfordjournals.org/content/114/1/195.1.full>