

SPARE THE ROD, SPOIL THE BRIDE



Modern studies of societal violence, which examine the ways violence takes on an internal logic within a particular social and historical context, provide insights into the theoretical justification and practice of medieval domestic violence. Like many twentieth-century Americans who consider violence “deviant,” yet widely accept its applications in sports, child-rearing and capital punishment, medieval Europeans privileged social violence as a legitimate means of maintaining cultural standards.

The custom that a man is the head of his household and has the right to beat his wife “to keep in line” is found in the medieval theory and practice that the loving Christian husband’s duty and responsibility is to maintain order. The pronouncements on husbandly entitlements cited in Gratian’s twelfth century canon law text Decretum formed generations of opinions: “a man may chastise his wife and beat her for her own correction; for she is of his household, and therefore the lord may chastise his own...so likewise the husband is bound to chastise his wife in moderation...unless he be a clerk, in which case he may chastise her more severely” (as cited in Coulton III.234).

Legal documents from a variety of regions witness that wife-beating was legally allowed under one or more pretexts, most especially the husband’s need to maintain social order in the family. Men must control, support, instruct and correct (Vecchio 121). Interesting sources are the thirteenth-century French law code Customs of Beauvais (see Akehurst translation), medieval court rolls (as discussed by Hanawalt 207), and court cases, such as those in Before the Bawdy Court.

In addition to works of religious instruction and law, other kinds of sources — sermon exempla, popular folk-tales, and secular conduct handbooks — sanction marital violence. For example, James of Vitry’s series of sermons and exempla “To the married” relies on disobedience with their attendant rightful punishments. Vitry’s exemplary vignettes about the prophylactic need to control women’s words and actions fall in two categories—those concerning a wife who disobeys the husband’s instruction and suffers painful consequences (Crane #227, #228, and #236) and stories of retribution against verbally disobedient wives (#221 and #222). Although ideally husbands should only chastise their wives for legitimate reasons, Vitry also provides tale #225 about a drunken man who beats his wife with a ploughshare in a bag and gets off without punishment. Vitry’s tales show sinful men punished by the wrath of God. But for the women of his tales, discipline comes not through heavenly intervention, but from earthly rulers, that is, husbands. In fact, by “disobedience” in a woman, Vitry means her lack of submission to her husband; the term never refers to a wider devotional sense of compliance with God’s edicts.

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"A DISGRACE FOR ALL JEWISH MEN"
PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF
WIFE-BEATING IN JEWISH HISTORY

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The study of medieval Jewish wife-beating focuses on the nature of discourse in rabbinic literature and occasionally involves archival case records or literary references. These finite materials are not accurate reflections of the extent of wife-abuse in medieval Jewish society.

Several articles about wife-beating in Jewish history and law have recently appeared, mostly in Israel. I have developed an alternative model for explaining