
Cressy, David. *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. xv + 641 pp.

If you are a medievalist reading the title of the book reviewed here you might be tempted to pass on to a review of a volume more squarely situated in the time period that you study, but I would urge you not to do so. This book will be of interest to medievalists, since one of the strengths of Cressy's work is his tracing of the changes effected on life-cycle rituals by the transition from late medieval Catholicism to early modern Protestantism. The author's aim is to provide us with a "social, cultural, and religious history of the ceremonies associated with birth, marriage, and death" in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. He is particularly interested in illuminating how life-cycle rituals were changed by the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the seventeenth-century English Revolution, and the subsequent Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Although the author is openly cautious of applying anthropological and what he terms "social-science" theory to the study of ritual, he attempts to understand the meaning of these rituals for early modern peoples. He looks at how ceremonies associated with the life-cycle brought families, communities, and parishes together, while simultaneously revealing frictions and dissenting opinions.

Cressy's thorough (the book is 482 pages) and well-researched discussion of life-cycle rituals in early modern England is divided into three sections: the first focuses on birth, baptism, and churching, the second on courtship and marriage, and the third on death and burial. The initial four chapters provide a discussion of pre-modern ideas about pregnancy and childbirth, as well as an overview of the birthing process and the mother's experience of the first few weeks following childbirth. While most historians of women in pre-modern Europe will be familiar with the childbirth customs detailed here, Cressy provides a nice summary of or introduction to the field.

Of perhaps more interest to women's historians will be Cressy's discussion of childbirth as a gendered domain. The birth room was inhabited only by women—the pregnant woman herself, the midwife, and the woman's gossips, or female friends and family members. The author states that childbirth transformed the marital bedchamber—the heart of patriarchy—into a "gossips' parlour." At this moment, women were on top, and this worried men. Cressy devotes a good amount of space to the resentment husbands felt at the "invasion" of their homes and bedchambers by women, to male complaints about the expense of providing food and drink for the birthing attendants, and to the male view that these associations of women were nothing better than drunken gossipings (here using gossip in its modern sense). Cressy admits his sources for childbirth (diaries, autobiographies, and literature such as the

misogynist pamphlet *The Batchelars Banquet*) were created by elite males. But he disappointingly makes no attempt to read these sources against the grain; was male resentment and scorn just a mask for male fear of the power women held over the creation of life? Nor does he present childbirth from a female point of view; a woman in childbirth was scared and helpless and needed the assistance of a practiced midwife and the advice and support of other married females. The author notes that contemporary medical advice recommended that in the first weeks following birth mothers should be kept in good spirits, and so should be visited by their family and friends. What Cressy does not acknowledge is that early medical practitioners were identifying what we today call post-partum depression, and so there may have been a sound reason for keeping a woman diverted by female visitors.

The author emphasizes that all women enjoyed a circle of feminine support at childbirth, even single women giving birth to illegitimate children, or vagrant women giving birth on the road. Cressy's acknowledgment that not all mothers were married and that not all were able to give birth in the comfort of their homes is very useful. Nevertheless, he forsakes this attention to variation when he insists on the universality of female support in the birthroom. How are we to reconcile this with the court cases that reveal single mothers often gave birth alone and in hiding? And what of the fact that single women who enjoyed the assistance of a midwife did so more so that the practitioner could demand the name of the child's father while the mother was in the worst throes of labor, rather than because communities were worried about the bastard bearer's need of assistance? In addition, single mothers might very well be giving birth in the not too hospitable confines of the house of correction, attended by other incarcerated, albeit female, strangers. Cressy's universal model of female love and support may have been less common to the birthing scenario than he suggests.

The author turns next to the religious ritual associated with birth, that of baptism. Chapters 5 through 8 focus primarily on the religious and theological, rather than on the social, history of baptism. In particular, Cressy examines the changes effected by the Protestant Reformation on this ceremony—in particular the demise of signing the infant with the cross, and the substitution of sprinkling the child from a shallow basin for immersing the infant in a baptismal font. While Catholics had viewed baptism as a transformation, or eradication of original sin, Protestants believed only faith washed away sin, so they re-focused baptism onto the child's initiation into the Christian community.

More pertinent to a feminist perspective is the fact that the mother of the newborn child was not even present at its baptism (whether under Catholicism or Protestantism). She was still home recuperating and would not appear in

public until her own churching ceremony a month after giving birth, while her child was normally baptized within the first week after it was born. The new mother also had an attenuated role at the christening party which often followed the baptism. Guests visited the mother in her bed and then adjourned to a separate room for refreshments and conviviality, although some parties were divided by gender—the women sitting up with the mother while the men gathered in a separate room. Cressy charts how in the late seventeenth-century private baptism became popular among the elite, with both the baptism and the subsequent christening party held in the family's home. What the author does not emphasize is how this change allowed women to participate in their child's baptismal ceremony for the first time, and how it may well have been elite women who pushed for such a change. Angry male clergy, who blamed the "pride of women" for the transference of baptism from the church to the private home, were more sure of, albeit not sympathetic to, the role of women in effecting change.

It is the chapter Cressy devotes to the churching of women that most clearly reveals how a class and feminist analysis would add much to the material presented in this book. The author details how after a month of bedrest a new mother would come to church to participate in the ritual of churching. But how many women in early modern England would really have been able to rest for a month after giving birth while their husbands dutifully performed all the housework and childcare, and served as the sole income earner during their "gander month?" Such a scenario sounds very unlikely for most of the artisanal, agricultural, and wage-laboring families of the time. Cressy also disagrees with feminist historians who view churching as misogynist, since it assumes a woman is made unclean by the natural process of childbirth and therefore needs purifying. Cressy convincingly illustrates that while Catholics had recognized this ceremony as one of purification, and reintegration into the community, Protestants preferred to focus on giving thanks for a safe delivery. Protestant reformers balked at the misogyny behind the need for purification and so the Church of England ended the customs of having the new mother wear a veil, of having the minister meet her at the church door before she was allowed back into the congregation, and of purifying the mother with holy water and the herb hyssop. Cressy also provides evidence that early modern women indeed wanted to be churched, in fact might church themselves or have their husbands perform the ceremony if a Reforming minister would not. The author asks, was churching "done to women, or for them?" Cressy presents a very well-balanced presentation of the debate about churching up to this point, but then he balks at the idea that women may have manipulated the ritual of churching to their own ends, thereby creating a special place for women and mothers within the church and the larger society. The author can contemplate women conforming to

patriarchy, but once again (as in his discussion of private baptism) he seems unable to entertain the notion of women confronting patriarchy.

The second section of this book shifts to an examination of the rituals surrounding courtship and marriage. Two chapters are devoted to customs of courtship and to public betrothal ceremonies, and how the latter declined over the sixteenth century to be replaced by written lawyer's agreements. Cressy makes good use of entertaining anecdotes and stories of love and courtship from both personal accounts and court records. The author again mentions that most of these sources are from an elite, male point of view and that "retelling these stories from a cross-gendered point of view requires an effort of empathy and imagination." His statement is somewhat perplexing, since stories of courtship from a female perspective abound in the ecclesiastical and secular court records (albeit filtered through a male clerical and judicial process), and female diaries and autobiographies are more plentiful than the author lets on. Cressy does make good use of the diaries of Elizabeth Freke and Joyce Jeffries, but there are many more he could have utilized throughout this work.

Cressy provides an entertaining summary of courtship and marriage, but one that does not move much beyond the literature previously published on these subjects.¹ The author also provides three chapters on contemporary ideas about marriage, impediments to marriage, and irregular or clandestine marriage. In one of his more interesting sections, Cressy dwells on the significance of marriage as a passage from one stage to another—from youth to adulthood, from dependence to independence. He says marriage brought with it new responsibilities and duties, but that it also brought privileges. Married women earned respect, recognition of their new household and public roles, and the sanctioning of their sexual activity (within marriage at least). They now could engage in female social activities reserved only for matrons, such as attendance at childbirths. But the author also mentions that 10 percent of English people in the sixteenth century, and 20 percent in the seventeenth century, never married. What did it mean for these people to never go through this transformative state? to never experience the public transition from servant to master/mistress, from dependence to independence? The reader is left with a desire for more attention to diversity, for not all people in early modern England experienced life-cycle rituals in the same way.

Two chapters in this section are devoted to the wedding ceremony itself and the secular festivities that followed. Although this is not his focus, Cressy's narrative shows how the advent of Protestantism in England led to the dropping of what feminists might today term some of the most objectionable and misogynist facets of the marriage service. Protestants ended the custom of the groom laying down a sum of money along with the wedding rings on the Prayer Book, as well as the

groom's vow to worship his wife's body. These same Protestants did, however, add the wife's vow to obey her husband. Some Reformers also dispensed with the need for the woman's father to give away the bride. Cressy disagrees with feminists who say this ritual treated women like chattel passed between men, for he says it was supposed to symbolize giving the woman to God and the father's consent to the marriage. What the author's argument does not acknowledge is that the woman was not giving herself away to God and that it was the father's, and not the bride's, consent that was at issue here. Even Cressy's re-reading of the ritual cannot deny the patriarchal overtones of this particular ceremony.

The third and last section of this book moves on to an examination of the rituals associated with death and burial. In some ways this section forms the most novel contribution of Cressy's book, since work on death and dying in early modern England has only recently become the focus of much research.² The author devotes four chapters to contemporary ideas about death, the effect of the Reformation on death rituals, the ceremony of funerals and burials, and the geography of internment. Cressy points out that by ending the belief in purgatory the Protestant Reformation significantly severed the relationship between the living and the dead, for prayers and intercessions by the living were now of no use to the deceased.

It is in this last section that Cressy produces his best class analysis of life-cycle ritual and provides the most attention to regional diversity. The rich and elite could afford elaborate funerals, and so religious reformers directed their concern about the use of excessive pomp at funerals to this social group in particular. Cressy shows how the elite could hire poor women to watch (sit up all night with), wash, and wrap the deceased in its shroud, how it was the elite who could afford to bury their dead in coffins (common people making do only with shrouds), how only the rich set up memorials to their dead (commoners did not even have headstones), and how the elite were buried within the church while the dead poor resided in the ground of the churchyard. It was also in the late seventeenth century that the elite switched from holding large, public funerals where they handed out charity to the poor, to private, night-time funerals where only people of like rank were invited. Class is not the only distinction Cressy sees, though. For the first time in his book he also notes regional variations in life-cycle rituals. People in the north of England were much more inclined to sit up with the corpse all night, and people in this region were also more likely to engage in the Celtic custom of the wake. The reader is left intrigued and wondering if birth and marriage rituals also varied by region. In his conclusion the author says more work needs to be done on regional variations in English life-cycle rituals and on comparing rituals in Scotland and Ireland to those in England. Cressy is right, and one wishes he would have taken more steps in that direction himself.

Cressy's discussion of death rituals leaves the reader wondering if gender mattered in death as much as it mattered in life. The author does not address gendered differences in mourning, such as if it was more acceptable for women than men to show grief. He cites examples of men exhibiting grief, but does not address this question directly. Also, Cressy notes that people asked to be buried near their nuclear or lineal kin, especially near their spouse (or one of them). Did women opt to be buried near their own families rather than with their husbands' families? Such a decision would have much to say about the extent to which women identified with the patriarchal family, a point the author sees evidence of elsewhere.

Cressy concludes that ritual was "crucial to English social life" and that the "central argument of this book" is that Catholic or traditional religious customs were slow to change over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that such change was by no means uniform, for there was a diversity of opinion about ritual within the Protestant Church of England. Neither of these conclusions is particularly striking or innovative. All historians would acknowledge that rituals have some function or meaning for people, otherwise they would not survive. And the consensus on the effect of the English Reformation is that it was a slow process, by no means uniform, and that divisions within and without the Church of England existed throughout the early modern era, erupting at some times more than others.

Cressy's views on change are also disappointing. After detailing 150 years of disagreements over life-cycle rituals between Catholics, traditionalists, Anglicans, Arminians (or ceremonialist Anglicans), Puritans, and radical sects such as Baptists and Quakers, the author does not satisfactorily explain why in the late seventeenth century it became acceptable to hold differing opinions on the performance of life-cycle rituals. Cressy does fall back on the now worn notion of an elite withdrawal from popular culture to explain the growing privatization or domestication of life-cycle rituals by the elite in the late seventeenth century. The reader is forced to extrapolate: as the elite adapted rituals to their own needs did they cease to care how the plebes celebrated births, marriages, and deaths? This seems unlikely, since we know that in other circumstances elites were continually interested in controlling the manners and customs of the poor and popular classes.

Cressy's conclusion leaves the reader with more questions than answers. The author has taken a most interesting subject, researched it very well, and presented the reader with a narrative full of entertaining and intriguing stories and anecdotes. Cressy states that his book is not "polemical" and he comes down smack in the middle of many of the most important debates in early modern British history—he sees individualism but it coexisted with communitarianism,

he sees nuclear families but they were connected to a wider kin network, he sees Puritanism but not as a movement separate from the Church of England, and he sees patriarchy but it did not always work in practice and there was no gender crisis. I would say Cressy's book has more of an argument than he concedes. It is a defense of the status quo in English social history—heavy on description instead of analysis, continuing a focus on the English and not on the British, and inadequate in its attention to diversity—whether that diversity be made up of regional, class, or gender differences. Most problematic for historians of women, this is a work of social history, of birth, marriage, and family no less, that continues to be told almost entirely from a male perspective.

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¹ Ralph Houlbrooke, "The Making of Marriage," in his *The English Family, 1450-1700* (1984); John Gillis, *For Better for Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York, 1985); Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge, 1987); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (Oxford, 1977) and *Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England 1660-1753* (Oxford, 1992).

² Mary Abbot, *Life Cycles in England 1560-1720* (New York, 1996); Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550* (New York, 1996); Mary Dobson, *Contours of Death and Disease in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1997).



Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. pp. xxiii, 228; 5 black and white illustrations.

Late antique and early medieval hagiography has increasingly become a major source for women's history. Women's roles in the early church, their missionary activities, and their important functions in monastic foundations are some of the areas of particular interest of recent studies.¹ Coon herself lists a number of different focal points in her Introduction: she wishes to investigate the paradoxes and inversions resulting from the contrast between women's bodies (often considered repulsive) and notions of women as brides of Christ. From a theological perspective Coon wants to focus on three major patterns: that of male altar space, of a comparison between female and male models of sanctity, and of the relationship between clothing and theological roles. The last area of