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Two hands grasp one another in a stony embrace: block letters, spelling out Stone Fidelity, rest atop their tender union. This depiction, a detailed image from the monument to Sir John Boteler and Margaret Stanley in the Church of St. Elphin, Warrington (fig. 85), symbolizes the focus of Jessica Barker’s first monograph, a comprehensive study on the double tomb across medieval Europe. These hands represent the complex nature of effigial expression wherein emotion, gender, marriage, and politics converge and inform perceptions of statued couples and their gestures of intimacy. Stone Fidelity: Marriage and Emotion in Medieval Tomb Sculpture tracks what Barker calls a “seismic shift” in funerary sculpture during the late Middle Ages and explores, for the first time in book form, the double tomb as a cultural phenomenon.

Much of Barker’s first chapter concerns itself with the development of the double tomb across the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. A shift from symbolic to material representation foregrounds her discussion, for the funeral effigy took on a transformative ability to “double the dead”: it housed natural corpses and memorialized surrogate ones (31). Alongside this artistic innovation came a shift in burial practice where sculpted and natural bodies interacted in more intricate memorials. At the same time, new ideas surrounding marriage and identity persisted including an increasing emphasis on spousal ties. This context informs Barker’s discussion of tombs outside the scope of traditional marriage: those of queer nature. The double tomb of Sir William Neville and Sir John Clanvowe (fig. 25) commemorates a
romantic relationship between two knights with its images of impalement and other heraldic symbolism. Barker expands her definition of queerness to include homosocial intimacy when she analyzes the double tomb of Agnes Oxenbridge and Elizabeth Etchingham (fig. 26). Though a less formal relationship than that of Neville and Barker, Agnes and Elizabeth’s memorial demonstrates that friendship could also be a means to invert conventional ideas around unity or oneness. Barker’s analysis of “queer tombs” holds important implications in studies on medieval relationships wherein the double tomb is rooted in a legacy of queer being.

Barker’s second chapter explores the rhetoric of love and its role in the construction of the royal tomb. Two monuments, the tomb of Richard II, King of England, and Anne of Bohemia in Westminster Abbey (fig. 35), and the tomb of Joao I, King of Portugal, and Philippa of Lancaster in the Dominican convent of Santa Maria da Vitoria, Batalha (fig. 42), demonstrate that a porous boundary between personal and royal imagery was developing in the Middle Ages. Through these effigies, Barker argues that the king’s two bodies is compressed into a joined image of husband and wife, marking a heightened emphasis on spousal bonds. As some of the first royal tombs to depict lovers holding hands, these memorials combine emblems, gesture, and text to portray both couples as inseparable in life and death. Of significance is Barker’s attention to the textual elements of the tomb of Richard and Anne: across the tomb, carved initials link the spouses materially, while epitaph language, drawn from poetic verse, unifies the couple rhetorically. The tomb of Joao and Philippa similarly depicts the pair embracing with their right hands, as a physical symbol of their bond, while the words on Philippa’s effigy link devotion to her husband with royal identity. Through a combination of epitaph language, effigial expression, and symbolic treatment of kings, the double tomb became less a representation of loving marriage and more a demonstration of royal power where emotional affection became an “effective means” of expressing monarchical identity (153).

Depictions of much-married women are central to the text’s third chapter, but the tomb of Margaret Holland, Duchess of Clarence, and her two husbands in Canterbury Cathedral (fig. 55) takes center stage. Margaret’s stony corpse rests at the center of the Holland memorial and is flanked by her spouses, both of which characterize her in a position of authority. Additional symbols also suggest such a designation: heraldic images throughout the chapel reference Margaret’s Lancastrian identity, a connection to her first marriage, which she repurposes
here as a sign of status and wealth. Barker also reads the three-figured program as both an economic and a religious response to widowhood. Through a stony memorial, Margaret avoids social pressure to remarry, and maintains her spiritual duties as devoted wife. Barker convincingly demonstrates that Margaret’s funerary scheme synonymizes remarriage and power, drawing sustained attention to the experiences of wives and widows in the medieval period. This chapter offers a striking contribution to feminist studies wherein Margaret’s stony narrative is one of artistic agency and post-mortem autonomy.

Barker’s argument culminates in a final chapter on what she calls the “polyvalence” of handholding: joined hands often perform meaning separate from their symbolic representation (224). Using legal and sacramental documents, literary texts, and manuscript images, Barker examines non-effigial depictions of handholding and their various contexts. A truce between Edward III and David I is discussed by an exchange of hands—a signal of shifting political power—while images of the crucifixion, where Christ’s blood flows into the hands of man and wife, represents spiritual transformation. In these examples, gesture is shown to express both possibility and unknowability, changing based on various personal and public contexts. This conclusory section ultimately demonstrates the efficacy of Barker’s undergirding logic: handholding is an important mechanism for tracing cultural, social, and political shifts across the Middle Ages.

The palm-in-palm detail on the front cover is a fitting symbol of this monograph’s accomplishment. A gentle touch reminds us of the intricacy of emotion and marriage, asking us to consider the enduring nature of intimate relationships. Barker astutely shows us that the double tomb, a memorial of the most intimate kind, is a site of reclamation—a place where narratives of identity converge and where politics of being materialize physically and symbolically.

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