

Book Reviews

Women In Anglo-Saxon England And The Impact Of 1066 Christine Fell with contributions by Cecily Clark and Elizabeth Williams
Indiana University Press, 1985, pp. 208, 73 ill.

“And alle were worthy men in hir degree”

Chaucer's description of the Wife of Bath's numerous husbands offers a hint, for the contemporary reader, of the problem confronting Christine Fell's study of *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*. Chaucer's adjective 'hir' is not a fourteenth century solution for the current his/her controversy, but rather the Middle English form for what now is rendered 'their'. If Middle English presents problems, how much more does Anglo-Saxon seem a totally foreign language. This unintelligibility of Anglo-Saxon to all but a few scholars may have contributed to the unedited preservation of the deeds, wills and histories which provide much of the raw data for Fell's study. For the reader willing to struggle with the distinctions between *wepmen and wifmenn*, between *AEjelric* and *AEjelswio*, the rewards are great.

In her introduction she supplies the reader with a survey of modern historical opinion on the social rôle of Anglo-Saxon women, beginning with Turner's eighteenth century observation that women held “high estimation in society. . . possessing property in their own right” (p. 7). Thrupp's violent attack on Turner in 1862 and conclusion that Anglo-Saxon women were “sold by their fathers. . . beaten by their husbands. . . and were never addressed. . . in the language of passion or respect” (pp. 7-8), formed the basis of the popular notion of Anglo-Saxon society thereafter, until the documentary evidence was subjected to re-examination after the middle years of this century.

Fell continues her introduction with a description of the only material she considers likely to yield valid data: the language itself, archaeological remains, and Anglo-Saxon documents, both legal and literary. She deliberately omits such material as penitentials written by foreign missionaries, considering these too “chancy an area to use to any great extent” (p. 20).

Although distinctions in social class, estate-owner, free-born *ceorl*, or slave, naturally provide limits on women's activity as they do on men's, Fell demonstrates conclusively, by her examination of wills and other legal documents, that women held and disposed of land in their own right, and, when necessary, went to court to secure recognition of their individual right in specific cases.

Especially fascinating is her discussion of food, drink and clothing, and the rôles associated with each. Although the descriptive terms for rôles in all these areas generally end in the feminine 'stere', evidence from wills supports weaving and spinning as female occupations, and literary and historical references describe women performing the honorary rôle of cup-bearer at banquets even if no documentary evidence can extend the Middle English picture of women who ran ale-houses firmly into the Anglo-Saxon period; but with one exception (a riddle in the *Exeter Book*) all the images that emerge of the Anglo-Saxon kitchen show this to be a place of male occupation. (Fell does not presume to suggest that they performed these rôles barefoot.)

That Anglo-Saxon England was not a static society comes across most forcibly in her chapter on religious life. She details the formative rôle women played in the establishment of monasteries in the seventh and eighth centuries, but concludes that “the equality of sexes which flourished in the eighth century in learning and literacy, was replaced in the tenth by equality in ignorance” (p. 128).

The final two chapters in the book, describing life after the conquest, are supplied by Cecily Clark and Elizabeth Williams, neither of whom continues the affirmative stance taken by Fell in the first seven. Clark makes no allowance for the "armed-camp" nature of Norman society in the post-conquest years, and, in spite of her numerous citations of the active rôle taken by women in the commercial life of the growing urban centres, she continues the presumption of inferiority which infests contemporary attitudes toward women's social rôle throughout history. When Williams dismisses the rôle of women in Old English poetry, "where she must be prepared to accept a dynastic marriage and is characteristically seen as a focus of hospitality in a ceremonial, male-centred society," (p. 172), one wonders whether she has in fact read the first seven chapters of the book.

If *and the impact of 1066* fails to continue its promise, in *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, Christine Fell has made a valuable contribution to the much-needed revaluation of women's historic rôle, and, indeed, to the growing body of social history in general. If one may twist the epigram, "Certe amo te, Sabidal!".

Mora Dianne O'Neill

The Marriage Bargain: Women and Dowries in European History, Marian A. Kaplan (ed.). *New York: Harrington Park Press, 1985, pp. 182*

Five essays, four of them reprints, which examine the nature and use of dowry in specific parts of Western Europe from the eleventh to the fourteenth and in the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, are assembled in this book, itself a reprint of another work also published in 1985. Several themes recur in two or more essays. Dowry is presented in its broadest sense as the provision made by her natal family for a daughter. Supplying a dowry may require sacrifice by one or more men of that family. The payment of

dowry as money satisfies the interests of men in stable and expanding societies. Dowry is a symbol and extension of relations between father and daughter and between brother and sister, and even between mother and daughter and between sister and sister. Dowry is pre-mortem inheritance and often a form of disinheritance. Dowry inflation occurs in periods of economic expansion or when there is a shortage of men for eligible women. Women have contributed to the creation of their own dowries, particularly in recent times. Dowry, or part thereof, may exist as labour intensive handwork, but when women have access to money, trousseaux are likely to be bought. In modern times, a woman's education and training may be her dowry. The original purpose of dowry — to maintain a daughter outside her natal home — has often been realized and exceeded, as dowry has provided a key to feminine independence, particularly in widowhood.

The first two essays consider the Western Mediterranean regions in the Medieval to Renaissance periods. In the first and most comprehensive essay of the collection, "From Bride-price to Dowry in Mediterranean Europe" (1978), Diane Owen Hughes describes the rise and fall of bridegift and the complementary fall and rise of dowry on the northern littoral of the Mediterranean in the period from the Barbarian invasions to the Renaissance. Between the fifth and eleventh centuries, Germanic law and practices — or variations of these practices — prevailed. The husband gave a gift to his bride's father and a morning gift to his wife in recognition of her lost virginity, and her father transferred the husband's gift to his daughter once the marriage was established. With the establishment of such practices, woman ceased to be a chattel and as a wife came to enjoy relatively independent status. In widowhood she could enjoy something close to dower, in the form of the usufruct of her husband's estate and sometimes even a portion of the estate. The wife of a living husband thus exercised control over her