

Deborah Simonton

## The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain, 1400–1900.

*Edited by Ågren, Maria & Erickson, Amy Louise. Series: Women and Gender in the Early Modern World. Ashgate, Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, Vermont 2005. 288 + xiii pages, maps, figures.*

Taking the fundamental concept of the marital economy as its point of departure, this collaborative volume produces important insights on the ways that the economic partnership of husband and wife managed resources across Scandinavia and Britain in the early modern period. It is the product of a series of conversations, most specifically at two conferences. The book is not about marriage per se but the ways that the life course of marriages shaped the marital economy and the strategies adopted by couples. It argues that understanding the marital economy is essential to making sense out of the past. A married couple, or the remaining survivor of a marriage headed the majority of households, and the household was fundamental not only to reproduction, but also to production, distribution and consumption (p. 3). It was far more than a social entity.

The text is shaped into three main sections reflecting the life course of marriages, thus part one consists of five essays exploring the dynamics of “forming the partnership”, part 2 examines “managing the partnership” in four essays, and the third part comprises four essays on “dissolving the partnership”. These sections are bracketed by Amy Erikson’s crisp introduction that lays out the key features of the discussions that follow, and by Michael Robert’s essay on why the notion of the marital economy has slipped from the key discussions of historical economy. Each essay focuses on specific

country studies, with coverage through the volume for Norway, Sweden, England, Scotland, Iceland, Finland and Denmark. Only Sweden and Norway figure in all sections, and Denmark, Scotland, and Iceland each have only one essay devoted to them. Wales is mentioned only en passant. The book is supported by a combined bibliography of secondary literature, which is especially helpful to the reader, and is accompanied by a cross-referenced glossary (with country of origin in brackets) which helps to clarify terminology used in the text. These are empirically based essays, built on archival materials cited in each individual chapter. Clearly sources and approaches vary, but there is widespread use of church and legal records, wills and inventories to establish the patterns of the "marital economies" examined by these fourteen authors.

In her introduction, Erickson describes the overarching role of the marital economic partnership and its relationship to the wider society. For example, she notes that "early modern states explicitly acknowledged their dependence on the marital partnership" while "most of the institutional framework of early modern economic life took the shape of marriage and inheritance laws." (p. 4) She also explains the politico-geographic complications of the Scandinavian and British worlds of the early modern period, since colonisation and empires shaped the institutional framework and marital practices. One of the aims of the book is to develop comparisons between these nations that had long-standing links and associations relating to trade, warfare, conquest, land transfer and marriage. Thus the remainder of the introduction draws out many of the similarities and differences in marriage formation, practice and dissolution, and is well supported by comparative tables, which act as an important reference for the reader. It is a tight, precise and helpful discussion, but like much of the book, requires concentration.

A theme running through most of the essays that make up "forming the partnership" is the relationship between courtship and clandestine or informal marriage practices and the legally constituted marriages that became much more the norm for later

periods. This is tied up with the view courts took of courtship sealed by intercourse, indeed whether a marriage existed or not, a feature that also changed across the period and which was handled differently by country. Thus Hanne Marie Johansen finds that female claimants in Norway were often successful in gaining financial support, and at times men were required to marry them– though apparently they seldom did. The virtually invisible process of courtship is articulated through these essays, so that Catherine Frances draws out the importance of friends and family for English marriage formation, both in the process of gift exchanges and the gathering of resources. The kind of resources the couple could draw on was crucial since it was the norm that they would expect to set up their own household on marriage, and the process of acquiring adequate such resources forms an important thread through these essays, examining inheritance practices, land ownership and dowry building through service, and the extent to which practices favoured men, women or were “equal”. Thus Anu Pylkkänen argues that “to a large extent legal subjectivity and individual rights were construed as exclusively male” (p. 76) despite the mythology of Finnish women as “strong” “equal partners”. Jane Whittle confirms that female servants’ wages were important in dowry building and shows that they could furnish and stock a house and smallholding, and could in partnership buy a cottage holding after five years, but acquisition of a larger farm “depended on inheriting land or receiving a significant cash bequest.” (p. 104) Gudrun Anderson’s study of the Swedish local elite and the ways that parents helped a new couple both with gifts during their lifetime and by bequests at their death is especially revealing in showing how children might expect to be supported and helped on their way in forming the new marital partnership.

As Hilde Sandvik says at the beginning of her chapter on marital property in Norway, “A married couple consists of two persons, who have to interact with other people and institutions. This puts the issue of authority on the agenda.” (p. 112) While this is blindingly obvious, it is also frequently assumed. She shows that while men might own the farms, and retain the legal entity of the decision maker, women clearly did enter

into contracts, which were upheld by the courts, especially those which could readily be seen as part of the female domain of managing the household. Similarly, the practice of special exemptions for women who were discriminated against by Danish marital law, particularly affecting women traders and property issues, is articulated by Inger Dübeck, who also illustrates a theme common to many of these essays: that economic practices were often at variance with the words of law. The final two essays in this section on “managing the partnership” deal with perceptions of power and control in within the family economy. Rosemarie Fiebranz illustrates how changing external economies, and the shift from one generation to another, and issues relating to negotiating the gender division of labour in the Swedish household (1750-1850) could erupt into violence, giving us a window into what might be seen as normative expectations and points of crisis in marital relations. Using letters and a detailed case study, Ann-Catrin Östman explores the “understandings of marriage, work and gender relationships” (p. 157) in late nineteenth-century rural Finland, where household economies were still central to everyday life. Thus she illustrates that despite deep love, her couple had very different views of what the marital economy meant: he wanting to relieve her from labouring, she wanting to share their love by working together.

The issue of tension in the marital economy obviously leads to discussion of how such unions were dissolved, whether by death or separation and divorce. Despite the severity of divorce law, and the narrow range of marital causes, Hanne Marie Johansen demonstrates a “surprisingly open attitude to divorce in early modern Norway” (p. 187) where in the interests of the community and the family, courts endorsed divorce and separation outwith the established grounds, also making efforts to ensure that the household economy continued to function. The other chapters in this section are concerned with provision for the surviving partner and the ways that the elder couple could extract themselves from active participation through retirement. As Liz Ewan explains, “provisions for its dissolution were built into many transactions between the

partners. From the formation of the partnership, through its existence, and at its end, the welfare of the surviving partner was a constant concern." (p. 191) These arrangements often depended on relations with inheriting children, and in much of the early modern world, as Maria Ågren shows for Sweden, self-sacrifice and individualism could supply the tensions between generations and siblings, while social pressure continued to shape how the transfer of property took place and the extent to which the older couple or surviving spouse had what Ewan calls "bargaining chips". (p. 202) Gifts played an important role in protecting a surviving spouse, or as Agnes Arnórsdóttir shows for Iceland from the fourteenth century, in providing for family members who would not otherwise inherit, such as illegitimate children.

The volume concludes with Michael Roberts' "Afterword" in which he argues that the concentration of Economics as it emerged in the nineteenth century has been based on understanding the system as a whole, "on the aggregated patterns of production, trade and consumption". (p. 240) Thus cultural, emotional and psychological needs of individuals and families, and the underpinning consideration of the marital economy slipped out of the picture, leaving us with a disjuncture between the macro economics of state and region and the day-to-day economics of people. Over time there were, of course, excursions by various authors into what affected people, their earning power and consumption patterns, notably the continuing debate over the male breadwinner wage. He concludes with the thought that developing a system-wide analysis need not always privilege the larger scale, and that collaborative works, represented by this book, "may just be the way this has to be achieved." (p. 254)

Although this book is situated in a series on the early modern, and several chapters focus on this period, others range more widely. This is partly indicative that early modern means different things in different places across northern Europe. It does mean that it is not always a straightforward task to compare one chapter with another. Notably the chapters demonstrate differences not only between countries or regions,

but also within nation-states while laws and practices could vary between town and country. The concentration on legal materials does limit the view, but with so much material missing, and recognising that private lives are often obscure to the historian, the authors have made good use of their materials. While we speak of private life in this context, the authors also show that the marital economy "was highly permeable to interests and wishes from 'outside'." (p. 187)

The book is frequently dense and requires concentration and indeed it demands rereading and time to assimilate the material. The chapters are relatively short-15 pages on average-so that the authors had no luxury to draw out their arguments, making for tight chapters. Despite this, there is a fair amount of repetition, particularly with respect to contextualising each essay. For example, we are regularly reminded of the northern European marriage pattern of late marriage and household formation. Certainly some of the repetition helps to counteract the tightness of the essays, and references to practices on other countries in the region are probably provided to aid the comparative context. However, the introduction covers much of this, and occasionally it does seem tiresome. Some of the most accessible chapters are those that draw explicitly on case studies, or comparative discussions of real people. It helps the reader see how the process worked and help embed and clarify the points of the author. Gudrun Andersson's discussion of the marital economy of Hans Ljung and Birgitta Ahlbeck brings the distribution of marriage portions and inheritance decisions of this one family alive, while Ann-Catrin Östman's discussion of how Johan Niss and his wife Hanna perceived their marital relationship is both touching and revealing. This book is important for bringing Scandinavian studies to English-speaking audiences, and the comparative framework helps to situate them into better-known material. It is however most important for providing such well-researched detailed studies, while bringing together studies on the same topics across several countries helps to fashion a quilt of many colours and shapes that together draw patterns allowing us better understanding of how the marital economy functioned.

*Deborah Simonton is Associate Professor of British History at the University of Southern Denmark.*