

Comptes rendus / Book Reviews

Dyan Elliott — *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. Pp. xv, 375.

St. Frances of Rome, according to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C., 1967), “aided the poor with great generosity and provided for the care of the sick in the city hospitals”. The *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1987) adds that she was always accompanied by a guardian angel, which may explain why she was named the patron saint of motorists. This tidy, if rather dull, portrait of a pious and charitable fifteenth-century matron omits all mention of the real reason she was acclaimed as an extraordinary and saintly figure by her contemporaries: after many years of marriage and many children, Frances, who as a young girl had wanted to become a nun, persuaded her husband to forego sexuality and transform their union into what was known as a spiritual marriage. In this form, joined by concord and harmony but not carnality, they lived together for many years more. Other women may have aided the poor, but they did not become canonized; it was Frances’s late-blooming celibacy that won the notice and admiration of both laymen and clerics in her own day. This is apparently too alien a virtue for standard twentieth-century reference works. It is, however, the subject of Dyan Elliott’s *Spiritual Marriage*, which sets out to examine the theory and practice of this hybrid of the monastic and the secular from early Christian times through the late Middle Ages.

The medieval Church’s attitudes toward sexuality and the body are both problematic and fascinating to the modern mind, and to modern historians of gender in particular. This is partly because of the virulent misogyny endemic in medieval theology, and partly because the virginity the Church valued so highly could serve to give women opportunities for power and self-expression: as nuns they could evade the established order of male dominance, which, as Elliott reminds us, was closely associated with sexual control. Nuns, of course, were properly controlled by the rule and by their vows. When laywomen, however, sought to take on some of the attributes of the professed religious, they came to present a troubling problem for the Church. They had escaped in an essential point from their obedience and

subjection to their husbands, and no matter how pious and chaste they were, the Church saw them as uncontrolled and masterless, a potential source, as Elliott suggests, of a radical challenge to the divinely established order of things. Not only were they perceived as unusually independent by themselves and by society, but they confused the firm categories of a celibate clergy and a carnal laity.

The early centuries of Christianity had provided a number of saints' lives entailing celibacy in marriage — St. Cecilia, who converted her bridegroom to the celibate life on their wedding night, is the paradigm — and the earlier Middle Ages added stories of virginal royal marriages. Once we move from a hagiography steeped in the miraculous and from cases of monasteries seeking to emphasize the spiritual virtues of their lay founders based on dubious evidence, however, we are left with biographical accounts from the later Middle Ages which seem to present some recurring features. There are only a fairly small number of examples of spiritual marriage of which the details are known with any degree of reliability, but the typical pattern seems to be that, like St. Cecilia, it was the wives who undertook to convert their often reluctant husbands to this formally mutual decision. Unlike Cecilia's, however, most spiritual marriages seem to have been initiated by women who had been conventionally married for many years and who had had children. Some had originally wanted to become nuns, and some did so as widows; most, however, had no such intention. Frances of Rome clearly fits this pattern, as does the better-known Margery Kemp. Both worked to persuade their husbands to agree to a vow of celibacy, for they were well aware that a unilateral decision involved them in the sin of disobedience. Birgitta of Sweden, who as a widow adopted an ascetic life in Rome, was distressed that her equally zealous daughter had abandoned her husband to follow the maternal example. Even Dorothea of Montau, whose domestic austerities and expressed revulsion from physical contact must have worn on her increasingly exasperated husband, could not renounce her obligation to render the marriage debt unless her husband also agreed to undertake a celibate mode of life. Margery Kemp's famous weeping fits eventually wore down her husband, and, although Dorothea's husband saw her mystic raptures as a way of avoiding housework, the local clergy took a different view. Eventually the pressures her admirers brought on him to stop obstructing her holy life forced him to agree. Plainly, the ability of these determined women to manipulate their masters by means of superior sanctity is not to be dismissed.

This tension between the higher calling of celibacy and the fundamental claims of the social order went back as far as early Christianity, and beyond. Elliott is at pains to demonstrate and explicate the well-known debates over the carnal and the spiritual factors in marriage. The first third of the book recapitulates the nature of the arguments that were made from the gnostics and St. Paul through the triumph of St. Augustine's moderate views on the sinfulness of sexuality, and on to the visceral misogyny of the Gregorian reformers and the thirteenth-century Franciscans. While the doctrines and debates of a millennium and more of Christian theology created the normative views of sexuality, marriage, and the role of women, it is not until we reach the eleventh-century aspirations of the laity to emulate monastic virtues, and still more the penitential movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth

centuries, that we find an ethos of spiritual marriage as a well-developed and self-confident phenomenon. Elliott's book sets out to describe the evolution of spiritual marriage over 1,500 years, but the evidence educed seems to indicate that it was in fact a development of the high and later Middle Ages which turned as a matter of course to the religious traditions of its society for validation and precedent.

Elliott makes the convincing argument that spiritual marriage in all periods was a multi-layered phenomenon which truly offered women some of the independence the Church feared. Despite the ambivalence of theologians, these spiritual wives attracted the admiration of a wide circle, both lay and clerical. Though Frankish kings could manipulate claims of religiously inspired chastity to repudiate inconvenient wives, by the fourteenth century spiritual marriage had become a choice for women, one which could establish both their individuality as well as spiritual superiority to a weaker, coarser spouse.

We cannot know how many women chose this path, or how many couples sought monastic piety in the world, in contravention of high theology's divisions of the social order. Then, too, the evidence which survives is skewed heavily to the upper end of the social scale. Did peasants, too, adopt this practice? Was it ever an option for any but spiritual virtuosos? Despite these remaining questions, Elliott's book, in examining what was certainly a minority practice, points up some of the most important features of popular piety and of a sturdy movement of spiritual self-determination that flourished in the last centuries of medieval Christendom. It would perhaps be useful to see a fuller examination of the social and possibly the economic factors involved, but Elliott's focus lies far more with the religious bases of spiritual marriage. For our twentieth-century society, however, which is ready to see St. Frances as a hospital volunteer but cringes from mentioning the celibacy which was central to her being and to her social role, this book is a valuable corrective. *Spiritual Marriage* is a contribution to our exploration, not only of celibacy in marriage, but of the intricacies of late-medieval spirituality and mentality.

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Alice Clark — *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (with new introduction by Amy Louise Erickson). London: Routledge, 1992. Pp. vii, 126.

Alice Clark's *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* was originally published in 1919. It was republished in 1968 and again in 1982. This edition, prefaced by an excellent introduction by Amy Louise Erickson, is the fourth.

Why reprint a 1919 monograph? In this particular case, one reason is the unusual group of women to which Alice Clark belonged. She was one of several female historians associated with the London School of Economics, founded in 1895. Clark attended the LSE in 1913, thanks to a Shaw research fellowship. At the time, almost a quarter of the LSE faculty was female, a proportion greater than at any