



*Dissolving Royal Marriages: A
Documentary History, 860–1600,*
David D’Avray
(Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 2014).

Review by: Katherine Harvey

Dissolving Royal Marriages: A Documentary History, 860–1600. By David D'Avray. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN 9781107062504. xii + 312 pp. £60.

David D'Avray is well-established as a historian of medieval marriage, having already produced two important volumes on the topic. The first of these, *Medieval Marriage Sermons: Mass Communication in an Age Without Print* (OUP, 2001) provided an edition and analysis of mendicant sermons on marriage; the second, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society* (OUP, 2005), explored the significance of marriage as a symbol and a social force in eleventh- to thirteenth-century England. In his new volume, D'Avray explores another aspect of medieval marriage, namely the dissolution of royal marriages.

Dissolving Royal Marriages: A Documentary History, 860–1600 provides a comparative overview of royal marriage dissolutions from the mid eighth- to the late sixteenth centuries, considering nineteen cases in which a royal couple (or at least one half of a couple) sought a papal dissolution of their union. The earliest case to be examined here is that of Lothar II of Burgundy, who in the 860s sought to set aside his wife Theutberga in order to return to his former concubine Waldrada; the latest is that of Henri IV of France, who at the very end of the sixteenth century secured an annulment of his childless marriage to Marguerite of Valois. In between, the volume covers annulments from across Europe, including both well-known examples (such as Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon) and lesser-known cases (such as Plaisance of Cyprus and Balian). The complete list of annulments examined is as follows: Lothar, Theutberga and Waldrada; Robert II of France and Bertha; Philip I of France and Bertrada; Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII of France; King John of England and Isabella of Gloucester; Philip II of France and Ingeborg of Denmark; Pere II of Aragon and Maria of Montpellier; Jaume I of Aragon and Lyonore; Sancho of Portugal and Mécia Lopes de Haro; Henry III of England and Jeanne of Ponthieu; Plaisance of Cyprus and Balian; Alfonso III of Portugal and Mathilda of Boulogne; Jaume I of Aragon and Teresa; Charles IV of France and Blanche; Maximilian I, Anne of Brittany and Charles VIII of France; Louis XII and Jeanne of France; Margaret of Scotland and Archibald Douglas; Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon; Henri IV of France and Marguerite of Valois.

As the subtitle suggests, this volume (the first of a two-part set, with a monograph on *Papacy, Monarchy and Marriage, 860–1600* to follow in 2015) approaches its topic primarily through a selection of key texts. For each dissolution, D'Avray gives a brief narrative plus a summary of the existing historiography, but the meat of each section is a set of translations which illustrate

the process of dissolution. The decision not to present a dual language text may disappoint some scholarly readers, who will have to seek out other (well sign-posted) volumes if they wish to read the original Latin texts. Nevertheless, the combination of high-quality translations with ample footnotes and substantial appendix (containing transcriptions of four unpublished manuscripts) will certainly prove more than satisfactory to most readers. In particular, the emphasis on translations should render this volume of great value to undergraduates studying one or more of the cases considered therein.

Royal marriage dissolutions are not a new topic of study for medieval historians; much ink has been spilt in discussion of several of the annulments in this book, especially the sorry story of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. The great value of this volume, therefore, is its comparative aspect, which allows the reader to put these cases in context – and in doing so demonstrates that Henry VIII's actions were nowhere near as original as is sometimes believed. Nor were all marriage breakdowns provoked by a man's desire to jettison his unfortunate wife in favour of a younger, more fertile model. Several of the marriages considered here were mutually unsatisfactory (for example that of Louis VII of France and Eleanor of Aquitaine), and in a few cases (such as those of Plaisance of Cyprus and Margaret of Scotland) it was the woman who sought the annulment.

D'Avray and his documents demonstrate that, whilst the canon law of marriage dissolutions became fixed early on in this period, the responses to this legal system became ever more complex – involving both increasingly large dossiers, and ever-expanding numbers of lawyers. Consequently, a king's desire to end his marriage often provoked a period of intense political wrangling, as church and state struggled to reach a mutually satisfactory outcome. However, this is not just a volume about high politics, and there is much here to interest medievalists whose specialisms fall outside the arena of church-state relations, including historians of gender and sexuality. Ultimately, this is a book about broken marriages and their terrible consequences. Much of the material presented here is of great human interest: these are stories of men and women struggling with serious problems such as infertility, sexual desire, and marital incompatibility. Few readers will remain unmoved by emotive documents such as Jeanne of France's plea to be spared the physical examination which would determine whether or not her marriage to Louis XII of France had been consummated.

When such powerful material is combined with D'Avray's unrivalled knowledge of the medieval papacy, canon law and theology, it is unsurprising that the outcome is an intellectually stimulating and highly readable volume. On its own, it is an extremely valuable addition to the existing body of literature on medieval marriage, and a must-read for any historian with an interest in royal marriages; in combination with its companion volume, it will surely provide the definitive work on this subject.

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