



Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England

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From childbirth and baptism through to courtship, weddings, and funerals, every stage in the lifecycle of Tudor and Stuart England was accompanied by ritual. Even under the Protestantism of the reformed Church, the spiritual and social dramas of birth, marriage, and death were graced with elaborate ceremony. Powerful and controversial protocols were in operation, shaped and altered by the influences of the Reformation, the Revolution, and the Restoration.

Each of the major rituals was potentially an arena for argument, ambiguity, and dissent. Ideally, as classic rites of passage, these ceremonies worked to bring people together. But they also set up traps into which people could stumble, and tests which not everybody could pass. In practice, ritual performance revealed frictions and fractures that everyday local discourse attempted to hide or to heal.

Using fascinating first-hand evidence, David Cressy shows how the making and remaking of ritual formed part of a continuing debate, sometimes strained and occasionally acrimonious, which exposed the raw nerves of society in the midst of great historical events. In doing so, he vividly brings to life the common experiences of living and dying in Tudor and Stuart England.

Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England Details

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From Reader Review Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England for online ebook

Tanya says

I had to write a review of this book for a genealogy class I'm taking, so I'll just cut and paste it here:

David Cressy's Birth, Marriage & Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England pieces together religious, governmental, personal, and literary sources to shed light on the changing face of English culture. By analyzing the specifics of ritual performance surrounding these important life events, he shows that religious observance was anything but monolithic, and that despite attempts to enforce theological uniformity, tradition and local need bred tolerance for wide-ranging social behavior.

Religious culture in England underwent drastic changes during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1534 Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church, and by Act of Parliament was declared the head of the new Church of England. Though initially the break from Rome was more about authority than theology, with time influential ministers brought a Protestant reformation to England. Edward VI, Henry's heir, was devoutly Protestant, though during the brief reign of his successor, Mary I, Catholicism was brought back with a vengeance. Under the relatively tolerant sovereignty of Elizabeth I many different religious factions prospered, although her successive Acts of Uniformity sought to homogenize observance through standardized Books of Common Prayer. The Stuart king James I attempted to enforce religious uniformity among the English clergy in theory, but in practice showed leniency to Protestant and Catholic laity alike. In 1606 Parliament passed an act that required citizens to sign an Oath of Allegiance to the King over the Pope, though James saw this as more an insurer of secular obedience than spiritual conformity. His son, Charles I, married a Spanish Catholic princess, which greatly worried English Protestants, particularly the growing number of strict Puritans. Religious issues contributed to the English Civil Wars of 1642-1651, and fermented beneath the surface during the years of Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate. The Restoration of Monarchy in 1660, the 1662 Act of Uniformity, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 largely completed the English Reformation, creating a moderate protestant country with a future of judicious religious tolerance.

Cressy's monologue utilizes sources often left to the realm of genealogists to trace evolving religious ritual through this turbulent time period. Parish records give information on baptism, marriage and burial dates and locations (including in private homes), as well as godparents, banns and licenses, dissenters, and clerical attitudes. Account books of churchwardens and private citizens show expenditures for celebrations surrounding ritual. Diaries, wills, and other family papers spell out religious beliefs and observances. In short, Cressy's work proves that the strongest social and cultural histories heavily employ genealogical data in reaching their conclusions.

He first turns to the rituals surrounding the birth of a child – the birth itself, baptism, and the churching of mothers. In the early Tudor period all rituals were very public events; even the childbed brought uninvited neighbors. The ritual of baptism was performed during a communal church service where the godparents (not the actual parents, the mother was generally not even in attendance) presented the child to the community. Depending on the depth of the local cleric's Protestantism and his willingness to accommodate the congregation, the sign of the cross may or may not have been made, the child would have been sprinkled or dipped, and a font or basin would have been used. In the later period more baptisms took place at home,

some even being performed by midwives. Controversies arose over all these details, as the most “godly” were concerned to erase all vestiges of popery, while the more conciliatory were concerned to find a middle ground between tradition and compliance.

One of the most original ideas presented in Birth, Marriage, and Death is that the ritual of churhing for new mothers actually persisted because women valued the occasion. Most medieval and early modern historians hold that churhing, a purification ritual carried over from Mosaic Law, was maintained as a way to keep women under patriarchal authority. Puritans resisted the tradition, citing its ties to Catholicism and the emphasis on “penitential cleansing.” Cressy argues that “churhing” persisted despite this disapproval because women saw it as a time to be celebrated by the community, and cites numerous diary entries showing anticipated gatherings of “gossips” (meaning women friends) at these times.

Cressy’s work on courtship and marriage supports the more recent idea that early moderns married in their mid-twenties, not late teens as had been earlier supposed. He estimates from parish records that 20% of brides were pregnant at the time of their nuptials, and that approximately 50% of couples had engaged in premarital sex, many during the time of their betrothal. Engagement contracts were as binding as marriage itself, as shown through multiple breach-of-promise suits.

As stated before, Tudor weddings were very public events. Banns were required to be called for three successive weeks before the marriage took place, serving as a sort of community invitation. In the seventeenth century it became more popular to wed by license; rather than have banns called one could purchase a license that allowed for a more private wedding. Some took things even farther, having clandestine weddings – those taking place in irregular circumstances such as outside the canonical hours of 8 a.m. and noon, those not officiated by an ordained clergy member, or those performed outside a church. Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act of 1753 was the final solution for this problem.

The last section of Cressy’s book deals with death and burial. The old Catholic rituals of extreme unction, funereal mass, and prayers for dead souls in purgatory were repugnant to England’s Protestants, so death rituals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were greatly simplified. Gone were long periods of sitting with the dead; reformed theology and exigency both argued for immediate interment of the body. Superstitious funereal masses were replaced by short enriching “sermons.” Ceremonial ostentation was replaced with the wearing of simple black clothing. Traditions surrounding funerals, however, were not easily stamped out, as mourners still insisted on praying for dead relatives, ringing death knells, and holding lavish feasts after burial. And like in most other rituals, many clergy were happy to compromise.

Where to bury a body could become an area of contention. While the letter of the law stated only baptized persons could be buried in consecrated ground, some clergy turned the other way in cases of infant death and even suicide. Some permitted dissenters to be laid to rest in churchyards, while others did not. Some charged higher rates for interment in “preferred spots.” Others disregarded the whole notion of consecrated ground and grazed animals in the churchyard. As in all areas of ritual, England was a mosaic of differing ideas from the most puritanical to most profane.

The changing traditions surrounding birth, marriage, and death in Tudor and Stuart England impacted the keeping of records. A baptism performed by a midwife may or may not have been recorded, depending on the view of the local clergy. He may or may not have felt it necessary to rebaptize the child. Clandestine marriages perhaps were not recorded at all. A dissenter may have been baptized in his own congregation, but buried by the Church of England. And during periods of civil war all records were kept inconsistently. A genealogist needs to understand this cultural history to most effectively find records.

Cressy certainly understands the cultural history of Tudor and Stuart England. At the root of his understanding is this: though there were many attempts from above to make England's religion more uniform, the cultural practices would remain diverse. Common people often did not understand the theological underpinnings of their rituals, but held to their traditions as a way to be a part of their community. Local clerics were frequently more closely tied to their congregations than the ecclesiastical authorities, and often compromised to help the community run more smoothly.

Even these generalizations seem perhaps too broad. Cressy ends his book by suggesting that there could be great regional variations and local patterns to ritual. Thus this is a ripe area of future study for genealogists and cultural/social historians alike.

Kaufmak says

When I get a chance to talk or teach about Early Modern England, Cressy's book always comes to the fore of my mind. I find the areas focused on birth and marriage the most helpful, especially when discussing the role of the church, superstitions and the Protestant reaction to the customs built up over centuries. In short, if there was any tie to the Roman church, the practice was either stopped or highly suspect.

As might be suspected, pretty much anything that involved women in a position of influence was viewed with concern, if not outright hostility. Cressy demonstrates this best in his discussion of midwifery during the period. Midwives had been respected and trusted practitioners through most of the period, but as the Reformation takes hold, the place of midwives is openly questioned if not suppressed by ministers throughout England.

In much the same way, marriage was undergoing significant changes during the Tudor Stewart period. Instead of being concerned with the role of women, the concern was over, what the Protestants, especially Puritans, viewed as Roman almost pagan celebrations. In particular the "Hymen Festivals" of the era were of particular concern. Eventually, weddings become more civic, yet more private affairs as England entered modernity.

The discussion about Death is also interesting, because the theological discussions about the after-life are particularly interesting, namely what to do with purgatory? You can probably figure out which side of the theological divide each church stood.

Cressy's book is getting a little long in the tooth these days, but if you need a better understanding of society in England during the Tudor Stewart era, it still provides a great deal of useful insight.

Wealhtheow says

My basic problem with this book is that it is not so much history or even an examination of "Birth, Marriage and Death" in Tudor and Stuart England, but rather a long series of quotes from sources. Cressy doesn't seem to have any real agenda or point--he's not trying to prove anything. Instead, he just throws everything on the page for the reader to draw their own conclusions. That could be good, but...his writing reads like this: "With shifting emphasis and scope for additions, the issues raised by Latimer and Bonner would resound for

more than a century: the efficacy of the service, on both spiritual and social levels; its role as a marker between clean and unclean states, as a sign of altered condition, and of renewed sexual contact between husbands and wives; whether the ceremony was a matter of law or custom, and the degree to which ecclesiastical authorities were concerned with its regulation; whether it could be performed in private or needed public display in the congregation; and how much of the responsibility for its conduct and interpretation came from the established church, 'sinister counsel', or from women themselves."

Note: that sentence was not the beginning or end of a chapter, part of the introduction, part of the conclusion--it was smack dab in the middle of the hundreds of pages about "churching". Cressy is like grad student who has done a lot of research but doesn't have anything to say. He just hopes if he writes 600+ pages, people will assume he's added something to the discourse.

Katie says

Again, Cressy skillfully mines sources to tell great stories. His book examines how rituals of birth, marriage, and death became points of conflict and negotiation during the tumultuous 16th and 17th century. He does more than trace changes in these rituals, but instead demonstrates the meanings behind variations of ceremonies and what these variations tell us about how people participated in and constructed these rituals.

Lynne says

So useful!

Danielle Chappell says

This was a text used for my Shakespeare class from graduate school. I loved it. I'm not a huge fan of Shakespeare but this book helped me understand the cultural references in Shakespeare's plays. I really enjoyed reading this...it's super interesting especially if you are into history, the medieval ages, culture, and sociology.

Rebecca says

my executors shall bestow upon a comely tomb or monument of hard stone, to be set up and builded by [...] within a short time after my decease, in which shall be engraven my arms and the arms of my wife together with the pictures of us both and fifteen children, the one half men children and the other half women children
(Thomas Mildmay, esq. in 1566 - p. 470)

A very well researched and well structured account - looking at everything from the theological and political angle (which much of the time go hand in hand) to the social history of everything; from how women (and their families) prepared for childbirth, to how graves and funeral memorials were kept after someone's death. Cressy draws on a wide variety of sources, from court archives, diaries, poems and prose, to parish sources, to get as full a scope as is possible - also noting when some things are easier to find in than others (and how the sources sometimes can be both biased, and show a somewhat distorted picture of how the reality must

have been for most people - some sources, such as court records, have less room for normality, after all).

The book also gives a fascinating glimpse of how almost everything could become sensitive subjects in turbulent times - first when the reformation wanted to extinguish all traces of the 'false teachings' of the Catholic church and later under Cromwell and the Restoration.

(And you get a new appreciation of the word 'gossip'! - But I do wonder how you split of group of fifteen children in half boys and half girls...)

Leslie Clement says

I stopped reading after the second chapter. The book was a bit tedious for my taste. Those who have thoroughly studied Tudor and Stuart history will probably find this more interesting than I did.

Rachel says

This is an excellent primer on culture and lifestyle in Tudor and Stuart England. I found the birth chapter fascinating (and how the "quicken" or stage when a mother can feel the baby in her womb was about when they thought the unborn baby got a soul). I got to page 160, future me.

Christine says

This book was extremely helpful in writing my undergrad thesis.
