Affections of the Mind

The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature

EMMA LIPTON

University of Notre Dame Press

Notre Dame, Indiana

© 2007 University of Notre Dame Press
Introduction

The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval Culture

Recent controversies over gay marriage have highlighted the important place of marriage in the complex nexus of civic and religious authority in modern life. We have suddenly been reminded that marriage is a deeply political institution. Although contemporary conservative voices have critiqued the political appropriation of marriage as a “perversion” of “traditional” values and of a “holy institution,” my book argues that a similar politicized negotiation of social and religious authority can be found in late medieval England where an emergent lay middle strata of society used the sacramental model of marriage to exploit contradictions within medieval theology and social hierarchy. This model, derived from Saint Augustine and later codified in the twelfth century, defined marriage not as consummation but as the “affections of the mind,” arguing that marriage was inherently virtuous. According to the sacramental definition adopted by
twelfth-century theologians and canonists, the substance of the sacrament of marriage was the mutual love between the two members of the couple; this love in turn was both the sign and substance of God’s grace. Affections of the Mind: The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature traces the unprecedented popularity of the sacramental model of marriage as a literary topic in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to its role as a contested category in the ideological conflicts between the laity and clergy, and between the members of the middle strata and the aristocracy. My book explores the ways that sacramental marriage was used to debate questions of authority in the period in a diverse group of late medieval texts, including the romance of Geoffrey Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale, John Gower’s lyric ballad sequence Traité pour Essampler les Amantz Marietz (Treatise for Exemplifying Married Lovers), the autobiography of the bourgeois mystic Margery Kempe, and the N-Town plays.

I argue that the existence of a body of literature in late medieval England that was preoccupied with sacramental marriage can be linked to two key changes in the structure of contemporary society: the growth of lay piety, and the increased size and power of the middle sections of society. In late medieval England, the lay middle strata were a growing part of society whose members sought to share and appropriate the privileges of both the aristocrats and the clerics. Members of the middle strata began to encroach on aristocratic prerogatives: non-noble landowners acted as parliamentary representatives, merchants purchased country estates and coats of arms, and, while the knightly class declined, esquires were elevated to gentle status. These new political and social roles for the middle strata threatened the traditional hierarchical status of the aristocracy. Similarly, the growth of vernacular literature and lay devotional practices changed the relationship between lay and clerical authority. Clerical prerogatives became a subject of explicit debate in polemics exchanged between Lollard and orthodox proponents over such questions as the nature of the sacraments and the idea of a priesthood of all believers. It is the primary contention of this book that late medieval English literature presented sacramental marriage as a model for such values as lay spirituality and mutuality in social relations, and in doing so, helped both to express and create values for the members of the emergent middle strata, as well as helping them to construct an identity for themselves and understand themselves as a social group.
Sacramental marriage was one element of a wide range of complex, contradictory, and contested ideas about medieval marriage. Although there were many tensions within medieval marriage, two are especially important for my argument here. Complicating the sacramental definition of marriage as consent, medieval theologians also taught the doctrine of the marital debt that required couples to engage in marital sex if the other partner required it. Another tension was between an understanding of marriage as a partnership based in love, a vision linked to the sacramental model, and a depiction of marriage as the rule of the husband over his wife. Robert of Brunne’s early fourteenth-century *Handlying Synne*, for example, paradoxically asserts that the husband is “No to be mayster, but felaw,” only to continue a few lines later to instruct that the husband is “maystre, lorde & syre / To hys wyl [his wife] shall meke hyre.” This juxtaposition of conflicting marriage models without an acknowledgment of their seeming incompatibility is characteristic of late medieval marriage teachings.

These contradictions between defining marriage as love or sex, and as partnership or rulership, made it a particularly apt venue for negotiating tensions about shifting social and religious authority in late medieval England. Saint Augustine’s consensual vision valorized a mutual model of marriage, assigning virtues standing to horizontal relations, and thus potentially offering an alternative vision for broader social relations, one that shifted from the rigid hierarchy of the Three Estates to a more egalitarian vision. On the other hand, the hierarchical marriage model was sometimes deployed in late medieval writing as a metaphor for royal or local governance. It is arguably precisely because medieval marriage had a hierarchical model as well as a horizontal or partnership one that it was so useful in the articulation of middle strata values. Adopting the sacramental model, as I will show, was a way for the middle strata to reject a hierarchical vision of marriage that was associated with aristocratic or regal prerogative. Similarly, embracing a sacramental model of marriage based in love and mutual consent was a rejection of a model of marriage defined by sex which, at least since the twelfth-century ban on clerical marriage, was linked to the promotion of clerical prerogative. Adopting sacramental marriage could thus become a way to negotiate some of the traditional legitimizations of social hierarchy in late medieval English society, giving the middle strata its own discourse of legitimation.
Given the competing models of medieval marriage and their varying uses by different social groups, late medieval representations of marriage can be said to have the characteristics of “uneven development” that Mary Poovey has identified in a different context as describing the historical development of ideological shifts. Poovey argues that ideological formation can be uneven . . . in the sense of being articulated differently by different institutions, discourses, and practices that it both constituted and was constituted by. . . . For some institutions or, for that matter, for some individuals or groups within institutions, an ideological formation received one emphasis or was put to one use; while for other institutions, individuals, or groups, the same ideological formation received a different emphasis and was used for another—even competing—goal.4

The sacramental marriage model was one possible “emphasis” in the overdetermined “ideological formation” of late medieval marriage, which the members of the middle strata used to promote their own social values of lay authority and a horizontal vision of governance. Thus, my argument should not be understood as a comprehensive portrait of late medieval marriage or its politics, but as a claim that the lay middle strata were specifically drawn to the sacramental model of marriage in contrast to the sexual model and the hierarchical model, embraced respectively by clergy and aristocracy.

Sacramental Marriage and the Promotion of Lay Authority

That the sacramental model of marriage supplied a vocabulary in late medieval texts for promoting the virtues of lay religious practice was in part the heritage of early twelfth-century legislation against clerical marriage which confirmed the status of celibacy as the truly pious life.5 Making sexual status the defining line between clergy and laity, this legislation thereafter tied the reputation of marriage directly to the status of the laity. In seeking to establish a clear hierarchy of the elite clergy over the lay masses, the laws against clerical marriage promoted the equation of marriage with sex, and sex with sin. Saint Paul’s injunction that “it is better to marry than to burn” was often invoked to establish marriage as a last resort for those
who could not maintain continence, and marriage was tolerated only as a remedy against carnal lust, a prophylactic measure against fornication and greater evils. Even those who did not entirely reject marriage, and who saw procreation as one of the goods of marriage, nonetheless ranked it clearly below widowhood and far below celibacy. Despite the negative reputation of sex among theologians, the doctrine of the marital debt required spouses to have sexual intercourse if the other spouse requested it, and gave each spouse the right to request sex of the other partner. Thus, while sex was thought to be sinful by medieval theologians, they nonetheless virtually required marital sex among the laity, an attitude that reinforced clerical authority and superiority.

On the other hand, by disassociating marriage from sex and defining it as love, sacramental marriage blurred the boundary between laity and clergy that reformers sought to impose and dignified marriage—and lay life generally—as a spiritual practice. The sacramental model of marriage had its roots in the writings of Augustine, who argued that marital affection instead of sexual relations defined marriage. In De Bono Coniugali, he argued that marriage was not just a relative virtue, in that it was better than fornication, but had three specific “goods,” which became the substance of later medieval teachings on marriage: proles, fides, and sacramentum. In De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia, Augustine described the conjugal bond as a reflection of Saint Paul’s exhortation: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church.” Augustine’s writings on marriage were the basis of the sacramental definition adopted by twelfth-century theologians and canonists, who defined the substance of the sacrament of marriage as the mutual love between the two members of the couple; this love in turn was considered to be both the sign and substance of God’s grace. In the words of Hugh of Saint Victor:

[T]he very association which is preserved externally in marriage by a compact is a sacrament and the substance of the sacrament itself is the mutual love of souls which is guarded in turn by the bond of conjugal society and agreement. And this very love again, by which male and female are united in the sanctity of marriage by their souls is a sacrament and the sign of that love by which God is joined to the rational soul internally through the infusion of His grace and the participation of His spirit.
By linking conjugal love to God’s grace, the sacramental definition clearly identified marriage as a spiritual practice. In the context of the laws against clerical marriage, the very fact that marriage, which defined the lay condition, could be a sacrament, suggested an elevation of lay status. Despite tensions between the sacramental and coital definitions of marriage, eventually, under Alexander III, consent between two legitimate parties, informed by marital affection, became the sole criterion of a fully legal and fully sacramental marriage.

The definition of marriage as based in love rather than consummation suggested that chaste marriage was an option for laypeople, a practice that seemed to blur the distinction between the continent clergy and the married laity which the reformers were so anxious to enforce. While chaste marriage was theoretically more admirable than procreative marriage, clerical authorities did not encourage this practice among the laity, and reasserted the centrality of sexual intercourse in marriage in pastoral manuals as a response to the adoption of marriage as a sacrament. Nonetheless, a number of theologians recognized the possibility of chaste marriage, and the broad availability of this paradigm is evident in the many saints’ lives portraying chaste marriage, which gained increasingly wide circulation in the course of the Middle Ages. Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale, a compendium of conventional Church teaching, includes chaste marriage as a remedy for lechery. Furthermore, Dyan Elliott argues, “The impulse towards chastity was not an idiosyncratic fancy restricted to a handful of saints but was shared by ‘ordinary’ wives with pious leanings as well.” Chaste marriage narratives and practices were thus one way in which sacramental marriage promoted the spiritual authority of the laity.

Sacramental marriage not only made chaste marriage possible, it also led to practical issues of maintaining clerical control over weddings themselves. Since technically love was the substance of the marriage sacrament and the exchange of consent the sign of the sacrament, only the two consenting parties were necessary to make a valid and sacramental marriage. Medieval weddings were potentially even more private than modern weddings. Unlike the modern ceremony in which a judge or religious officiant pronounces the couple husband and wife, according to medieval canon law, the words of the couple themselves had the performative function. Social and legal historians have shown that marriages consisting of a private exchange of vows, often referred to by critics as “clandestine marriages,” were upheld by the Church courts.
Furthermore, by making the sign of the marriage sacrament the exchange of vows, theologians ironically gave to laypeople crucial jurisdiction over one of the sacraments. With the exception of baptism and penance in extremis, no other sacrament could be performed without a priest. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, the words of the priest were performative in the sense that they caused what they signified, by transforming the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. In the case of the marriage sacrament, by contrast, the words of consent spoken by the lay couple, rather than the words of the priest, were performative, and effectively transformed the two individuals into the one flesh that constituted the married state. This remained the case whether or not the wedding was performed in a church according to the proper liturgy and in the presence of a priest. The anomaly of the sacrament of marriage both presented a threat to clerical control over weddings and posed a potential challenge to the larger idea of priest-mediated sacraments.

This potential was realized in fifteenth-century East Anglia, when the Lollard heretics made marriage part of their challenge to clerical authority and the validity of the sacraments. Understanding that the hierarchy of virginity over marriage bolstered clerical monopoly and restricted lay claims to spiritual authority, the late medieval Lollards made an attack on clerical celibacy part of their challenge to clerical prerogative, and promoted marriage as a vocabulary for moral and religious life. According to the records of those prosecuted for heresy in the diocese of Norwich between 1428 and 1431, Edmund Archer of Lodne made the heretical claim that “chastite of monkes, chanons, freres, nonnes, prestes and of ony other persones is not commendable ne meritorie, but it is more commendable and more plesyng unto God al suche persones to be wedded and bringe forth frute of hare bodyes.” This deposition, like the many other similar ones in this court record, not only questioned the hierarchy of celibacy over marriage, but as a consequence also rejected the superiority of the clergy to the wedded laity. Just as the Norwich heretics systematically denied the need for other sacraments such as confirmation, confession, and baptism, and the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, so too they denied the need for “contract of wordis or solemnizacion in churche,” claiming that only the consent of love between a man and a woman was necessary for marriage. These depositions suggest that the accused did not understand that marriage was a uniquely lay sacrament that could be fully valid and fully sacramental according to orthodox definitions without the participation of the clergy. Nonetheless,
they clearly did see the political importance of marriage, since they made their claim that marriage was superior to celibacy part of a broader attack on clerical prerogative.

Although the East Anglian Lollards used marriage explicitly to challenge clerical authority, marriage and the family also played an increased role in late medieval religious practices which was symptomatic of a broad-ranging growth in lay piety. Family pews were just beginning to be used in the late fifteenth century, and the growing presence of family tomb structures and marks of family ownership such as coats of arms in stained glass windows suggests that the family had become an important site for religious devotion in orthodox as well as heretical contexts. Gail McMurray Gibson has shown that late medieval East Anglian parish churches often featured donor portraits with their families or married couples. Marc Glasser has demonstrated that the number of married saints, including those with children and chaste saints, increased in the late Middle Ages. For example, the increasingly popular cult of thrice-married Saint Anne was an overt celebration of family and kinship in religious practices, as the work of Kathleen Ashley, Pamela Sheingorn, and Gail McMurray Gibson has demonstrated. Vernacular devotional books and religious objects were often found in the wills of wealthy merchants, and frequently a particular family member was named as the recipient. Households supplied the bread for church services, encroaching on what had been the domain of the clergy. Although laypeople were primarily spectators in Church liturgy, a new kind of private liturgy developed in books of hours, which were reformulated from old monastic rounds for consumption in the world and in the household. Noblemen and wealthier merchants had private chapels in their homes, presided over by a family chaplain. As these examples illustrate, in addition to the explicitly political uses of marriage made by fifteenth-century East Anglian Lollards, marriage and family were increasingly at the center of lay piety, subtly eroding the monopoly of clerical power.

Although the preceding account demonstrates several ways in which medieval marriage theology could promote lay piety, this perspective has not been emphasized in scholarly accounts of medieval theological history. Although the sacramental model of marriage was communicated to the laity through sermons, guidebooks, and penitentials, the fact that the marriage sacrament did not require a priest was deliberately avoided in these venues directed to a lay audience, which systematically described marriage
as performed by a priest. Works such as *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the N-Town Mary plays did political work by teaching this theology in vernacular forms that were available to a wider audience. As my readings will show, late medieval literature did not just repeat traditional marriage theology, but deployed it strategically to highlight its unorthodox implications.

**Sacramental Marriage and the Social Authority of the Middle Strata**

Late medieval English literature enlisted the sacramental model of marriage both to advocate for lay religious authority and to promote the social values of the emergent “middle strata” of society, an influential term coined in 1948 by Sylvia Thrupp to include “the lesser types of gentry, the merchant class, country yeomeny cherishing a tradition of free ancestry and perhaps also the more substantial semi-mercantile elements in London and other cities.” Although people like merchants, franklins, and lawyers may not have seen themselves as having the same interests, their absence from the traditional three estates model inevitably put them together. Even if they were not visible in the nostalgic and anachronistic three estates model still preached in the late Middle Ages, the growth of this sector of society was nonetheless evident from documents such as the poll taxes, sumptuary laws, and guild prayers. Furthermore, as Sylvia Thrupp and Paul Strohm have shown, the importance of this section of society was increasingly recognized in sermons, parliamentary documents, and other discursive accounts of late medieval English society. Despite the fact that the middling sections of society were recognized in a variety of documents, as Sylvia Thrupp has argued, “there was obviously little cohesion among these assorted groups, not even a common theory of a middle class.” The members of the middle strata of society were in search of a social identity and a legitimizing ideology because they were a growing and newly powerful section of society that did not fit into conventional medieval theories of social formation. Sacramental marriage served an important role in the construction of an ideology for this emergent social group.

By depicting marriage as a partnership between husband and wife, the sacramental model favored a horizontal vision, and thus offered a microcosmic alternative vision for a broader social structure that worked to level the hierarchy of the three estates. That this more horizontal vision of society
appealed to the members of the middle strata is not only logical, it is also
evident from the social models present in documents such as contempo-
rary records of guild ceremonies, and conduct books, which Kathleen Ash-
ley, Mark Amos, and others have shown were consumed by both urban
and rural elements of the middle strata of society.31 For example, at the be-
ginnings of meetings of the fraternity of Saint Christopher at Norwich,
the members prayed for all of society. After enumerating the members
of the “state of holy chirche,” and then listing a range of aristocrats, the
next group links urban and rural, noble and non-noble together, praying
for “alle knyghtes, squyers, cite\$enys and Burgeys, fraunkeleyns and alle
trewye tyliers and men of craft.”32 All three estates were grouped together
in a fifteenth-century conduct book, John Russell’s Book of Nurture, in the
description for a possible seating plan for a feast. At the “table of good squy-
eris” the text proposes to seat religious figures (such as parsons, vicars, and
parish priests), urban figures (such as city bailiffs, merchants, and “riche
artyficeris”), middling landowners (such as “yeman of be crowne” and
“sargeaunt of arms”) and a broader category of “gentilmen.”33 This descrip-
tion of the people to be seated at this table does not proceed by listing
the members of each estate in turn, but instead moves randomly among
the three estates as it progresses. In this way, this seating plan not only cre-
ates a group that cuts across the three estates, but demonstrates the extent
to which the three orders could be integrated in fifteenth-century accounts
of social status, especially those oriented to a middle strata audience.

This more horizontal method of viewing medieval society which trav-
erses the conventional divisions of the three estates was also evident in a
number of parliamentary documents that used income as a significant factor
in determining social status. In the 1379 poll tax, for example, abbots, priors,
and archdeacons are equated with barons and knights, while wealthy mer-
chants are put on the same level as knights and esquires.34 Similarly, the
1363 statute allowed merchants, citizens, burgesses, artificers, and handi-
craftsmen who made five hundred pounds per year to dress like esquires and
gentlemen who made a hundred pounds per year.35 Although the traditional
model of society was not completely absent in this model, given that the
nongentle urbanites had to make more money to garner the same privileges
dress as their gentle rural counterparts, these two statutes show a new
recognition of the power and status of the middling sections of society and
acknowledge horizontal models of society that challenge the hierarchy of
traditional medieval political theory. In their emphasis on the role of income in defining social status, they also point to the increased social mobility of late medieval English society, especially for the middle sections.

This new social mobility can be linked to changing economic circumstances in the country and to the growth of professionalism and civil service. The economic conditions of late medieval England supported the advancement of smaller over larger landowners. In the mid-fourteenth century, revenues from aristocratic estates declined, and land values had dropped even more by the fifteenth century, although these factors were somewhat mitigated by the tendency of the size of landed estates to increase and by the addition of cash incomes to land resources. On the other hand, economic conditions favored the advancement of smaller landowners, referred to in the poll tax as franklins, sergeants, firmarii, and esquires of lower means, who may have drawn a larger proportion of their income from rents. This group was a prime target of the 1363 sumptuary legislation, reflecting an anxiety about the social mobility of this group in particular. These smaller landowners played an increasingly important role in the administration of the shire, holding local offices and representing their localities in the House of Commons in Parliament, roles that had previously been held by knights. As E. W. Ives has shown, by the fifteenth century, the professionalization of legal practice provided an opportunity for social mobility, allowing a family to “rise within or into the ranks of the gentry.” A high-level lawyer like a sergeant-in-law could make enough to buy a significant estate, and in fact fifteenth-century English lawyers often showed their social aspirations by buying land and becoming country gentlemen. In addition to lawyers, a new class of civil servants also developed during this period, providing similar possibilities of social mobility for those wishing to enter or rise within the ranks of the gentry. Wealthy merchants often intermarried with gentry, sent their sons to serve in gentle households, and even bought up land to become country landowners.

The middle strata’s social mobility has been linked by scholars to a social vision in which virtue is defined by individual behavior rather than class status. Conduct literature promoted the idea that estate depends on behavior rather than birth, making instruction in aristocratic manners a venue for the development of an ideology of social mobility that appealed to the members of the middle strata. The “Lyttylle Childrenes Lytil Boke,” for example, decrees that having good manners makes people exclaim, “A
gentyleman was heere.”41 Similarly, the fifteenth-century Book of Nurture presents profession as dependent on the capacity to learn:

> Now, son jiff y the teche, wiltow any thynge lere?
> wiltow be a seruaunde, plow3man, or laborere?
> Courtyour or a clark, Merchaund, or masoun, or an artificere?42

This text articulates the very real promise that education could offer for social advancement in an age when law and civil service could provide entry into the gentry, linking social status to personal aptitude, while also suggesting that a failure to learn could lead to downward mobility.

This valuation of individual behavior and horizontally defined social relations which characterized the values of the middle strata correlates with the ideals of sacramental marriage outlined earlier. As we have seen, parliamentary documents, guild ceremonies, and conduct books all depicted a vision of society that made comparisons across the three estates, rejecting the traditional social hierarchy. Similarly, by defining marriage as mutual consent, the sacramental model depicted marriage as an equal partnership, in contrast to the hierarchical image of marriage simultaneously perpetuated in marriage sermons that instructed wives to obey their husbands. We have seen that the new social mobility of the middle strata correlated to the development of an ideology of virtue based in individual behavior rather than class status. Similarly, the sacramental model made marriage a matter of individual volition and private choice rather than an issue of family alliance or clerical control. Given this correlation between the social circumstances and values of the middle strata and the ideals of sacramental marriage, it is not surprising that a range of late medieval literature, from drama to romance, from lyrical ballads to mystical autobiography, showed an interest in sacramental marriage as a means of expressing the values and ideals of this emergent class.

The Literature of Sacramental Marriage

Aping aristocratic manners, dress, and pastimes and buying country estates and coats of arms were just some of the many ways that materials of aristocratic culture were appropriated and transformed by members of the middle
strata to suit their own values and circumstances, as the work of Sylvia Thrupp and others has demonstrated. In addition, the increased emphasis on the role of the family in religious practices, which I have described above, led to a similar appropriation and transformation of the materials of clerical culture as merchants became patrons of parish churches and owners of devotional texts and objects. The literature of sacramental marriage was another instance of this broader cultural appropriation and was accomplished through the revision of existing genres of writing and their accompanying models of love and marriage, demonstrating a process of cultural consumption of existing traditions. As Michel de Certeau has argued, it is important to analyze the "manipulation" of representation by "those who are not its makers," since consumption manifests itself "through its ways of using the products imposed by the dominant order," making them "function in another register," which may entail making what one absorbs "one's own, appropriating or reappropriating it." While the writers of this marriage literature in late medieval England are, of course, "makers" of representation, they are also notably appropriators, taking pre-existing forms and adapting them to their purposes in ways similar to de Certeau's imagining of the activism (rather than passivity) of modern consumers.

Late medieval marriage literature shows that its authors read or consumed existing genres and revised them to create new forms of marriage literature that often do not fit neatly into existing generic categories. The hybrid forms of late medieval sacramental marriage literature were a way both to appropriate the legitimation of traditional genres and to promote new social values. For example, in many vernacular works of the late Middle Ages, mystical marriage, traditionally used to glorify clerical celibacy and constructed by ecclesiastical interests, was depicted as part of the experience of lay spirituality, working to promote the virtues of earthly marriage. *Fin amor*, the literary expression of aristocratic honor and identity in ballads and romances, was transformed to create an image of mutual love in marriage that modeled a more horizontal model of social relations than could be found in the traditional three estates. By presenting marriage as a model for such values as lay spirituality and mutuality in social relations, the literature of sacramental marriage helped both to express and to create the values of the emergent middle strata, and assisted the members of the middle strata of society in constructing an identity for themselves and understanding themselves as a social group. The complex generic formulations
of late medieval literature which depicted sacramental marriage showed an engagement with a new social and religious ideology in the period, illustrating Fredric Jameson’s contention that “the mediatory function of a genre . . . allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text and twin diachronic perspective of history of forms and the evolution of social life.”46 The prestige and authority of literary forms was eminently transferable, arguably far more so than the institutions and social positions of aristocrats and clerics.

I have chosen four texts as case studies which represent a range of genres demonstrating this “evolution of social life” through an engagement with aristocratic and clerical genres. By including the romance of the Franklin’s Tale, the lyric ballad sequence of Gower’s Traité, the drama of the N-Town plays and the mystical autobiography of The Book of Margery Kempe, my book shows that the obsession with the discourse of sacramental marriage in late medieval English texts was not restricted to the literary history of a particular genre, but was instead a broad cultural phenomenon in which marriage was enlisted to perform ideological work for the middle strata. Each of my chosen texts can be identified as a recognizable genre and also as a hybrid (joining, for example, lyric ballad and treatise, or sermon and romance), showing the way that new generic formulations were necessary to express the emergent cultural values of the lay middle strata of society.

In addition to selecting examples from a range of genres, I have chosen to focus my analysis on works by authors and narrators representing the variety of social positions that composed the middle strata. Geoffrey Chaucer was the son of a vintner and became a civil servant (first a controller of customs from 1374 to 1387, and later a clerk of the king’s works until 1391) and also an “esquire” who fought in the campaign of 1359–60, making him emblematic of those members of the middle strata whose social position was difficult to classify in traditional terms.47 In contrast to Chaucer’s own bureaucratic and mercantile experience, his rural landowner narrator, the Franklin, was representative of smaller non-noble landowners whose fortunes had risen in the fourteenth century in part due to their reliance on rents, at a moment when falling land values were hurting aristocrats with larger estates.48 John Gower, who has been identified as an “esquire” and possibly as a lawyer, may have embodied a different aspect of the new professionalism of the period. Margery Kempe, herself a businesswoman, was the daughter of a wealthy merchant who was mayor of Lynn five times,
and one of the town's two members of Parliament. Finally, the N-Town plays, possibly performed by guild members, may have found an audience in a broader cross section of urban society. The striking convergence of interest in sacramental marriage among these authors and narrators hints at the congruent religious and social goals within the diversity of late medieval English middle strata.

My work joins that of a number of scholars who have used the formulations of sacramental marriage to argue against the opposition of love and marriage in medieval culture as outlined in C. S. Lewis's landmark book *The Allegory of Love* (1936). Lewis saw the medieval literature of “courtly love” as fundamentally opposed to the predominant marital ideologies of the day, which he defined as the aristocratic vision, in which the woman was “little better than a piece of property,” and the ecclesiastical vision, in which “passionate love itself was wicked,” a depiction of marriage echoed in George Duby's widely cited *Medieval Marriage* (1978).^49^ Henry Ansgar Kelly's important book, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (1975), sought to rectify this antimatrimonial vision of the Middle Ages by demonstrating the compatibility of love and marriage in a range of late medieval literature.^50^ More recent book-length studies by Neil Cartlidge and Kathryn Jacobs have developed from Kelly's work, charting the theological and legal ramifications of the sacramental model of marriage backward into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and forward into the Renaissance. Although they engage with legal and theological history, all of these books focus on marriage as a domestic practice featuring the relationship of husbands and wives.

By contrast, my book argues for the public significance of this private institution. In this respect I follow a number of critics who have shown marriage to be crucial to the construction of late medieval sovereignty. David Wallace, for example, argued in reference to the *Clerk's Tale* that “tyranny is . . . particularly for Chaucer, intimately connected with metaphors and flesh-and-blood practices of marriage.”^53^ Commenting on royal coronation rituals, Louise Fradenburg argued that the definition of marriage as consent was crucial to the construction of a positive image of royal power: “Marriage . . . is a powerful way of imagining the transformation of inequality into equality and thus assists sovereignty in the production of the experience of choice rather than coercion.”^54^ Lynn Staley has recently argued that “works of domestic economy and pastoral management” are “linked to a concept of nationhood,” in which royal and familial figurations of authority
are implicated in each other. Following the work of these scholars, my book treats sacramental authority as deeply bound up with competing notions of society.

Rather than focusing on the marriage as an exploration of sovereignty, however, my book demonstrates how the literature of sacramental marriage engaged the mutually constituting realms of social and religious order by promoting the authority of the lay middle strata. Thus, the “politics” of my book title refers to social and religious rather than governmental politics.

In this connection, my work is influenced by the scholarship of Sarah Beckwith and Miri Rubin whose work on the Eucharist has demonstrated how Corpus Christi festivals and Corpus Christi drama mediated tensions between lay and clerical authority and staged issues of power and status within the lay urban community. My argument that the literature of sacramental marriage promoted the values of the lay middle strata is indebted to Beckwith’s and Rubin’s understanding of sacramental representation as engaging with questions of both secular and religious authority. Beckwith’s work has also shown that representations of the sacrament of the Eucharist were not enactments of a static set of established beliefs, but a staging of tensions and fissures within urban society. Similarly, my argument suggests that literary representations of the sacramentalism of marriage do not so much convey conventional church teachings—although they draw on this discourse—but enact social tensions around the increasing power of the lay middle strata. Representations of the marriage sacrament were not deployed solely by the clergy, nor were representations of love the exclusive province of the aristocracy; they were also available to and appropriated by the lay middle strata. In looking at the relationship between literary representations of marital sacramentalism and the ambitions of the lay middle strata, I engage what Beckwith has termed the relationship between “social relation and symbolic act.”

In arguing that sacramental marriage promoted the values of the lay middle strata, I understand marriage itself as a fluid and contested category rather than one with a fixed meaning. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s and Homi Bhabha’s notions of “hybridity,” Glenn Burger has argued, “Medieval conjugality provides a conduit through which power relations flow, change and crystallize in hegemonic ways, working to resist and subvert authority.” The late medieval literature of sacramental marriage revised aristocratic and clerical traditions of writing on love and marriage in order to promote the values of the lay middle strata, subverting aristocratic and
clerical prerogatives. The changing meanings of marriage in this period can be linked to a fluidity within the identity of the middle strata as its members began to understand themselves as a social group.

I begin with the Franklin’s Tale from The Canterbury Tales, which has been central to discussions of late medieval marriage since 1912, when George Lyman Kittredge famously proclaimed it Geoffrey Chaucer’s “solution” to the “problem” of gendered sovereignty raised in the tales of the “marriage group.” Unlike Kittredge, I will not make a broad argument about Chaucer’s view of marriage, but will suggest that the Franklin’s Tale is part of a larger cultural formation in which members of the lay middle strata used sacramental marriage to promote and formulate their social and cultural values. In making this claim, I build on the work of Lee Patterson and Glenn Burger, both of whom have argued that the depiction of marital relations in the Canterbury Tales is tied to the construction of bourgeois ideology. By choosing to focus on one of the Canterbury Tales, I will necessarily not be saying all there is to say about marriage in the work of Chaucer, nor all there is to say about marriage and the construction of bourgeois ideology in the tales. Instead, my goal is to show how one specific marriage model—sacramental marriage—was appropriated and adapted by the middle strata and to demonstrate how Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale is part of a larger body of writings drawn from disparate genres and authors to promote and formulate an ideology for the middle strata. Thus, I have chosen to focus on the Franklin’s Tale not because it is Chaucer’s answer to the marriage “problem,” as Kittredge suggests, but because it is the tale most focused on the politics of the sacramental marriage model.

Specifically, I argue that in the Franklin’s Tale, Chaucer uses marriage to formulate a social ideology by revising the conventions of romance and secularizing an ecclesiastical tradition (as yet not properly recognized in the criticism of the tale) that drew on the vocabulary of the classical friendship tradition to describe mutuality in marriage. By the end of the tale these virtues of free will, generosity, and private value apply less to the married couple than to the homosocial bonds of friendship forged among the three men—the Knight, the Squire, and the Clerk—in their negotiations about the marriage. This exchange of marriage ideology among men becomes the basis for the idea that people of different social classes have equal claims to gentillesse. This political ideology would have appealed to a person like the Franklin, who as a “freeholder” was representative of the newly socially mobile middle strata of society, and as a civil servant was representative of
the growth of government and civic ideology in the later Middle Ages. The Franklin’s focus on male bonding at the end of the tale and his failure to address Arveragus’s violence toward his wife suggest that he may be more invested in using marriage to articulate a horizontal ideology of equality than in constructing truly egalitarian gender relations. Thus, the tale is part of a new cultural formation of a political and social ideology for the Franklin and other members of the middle strata constructed from the discourse of marriage.

Just as Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales has shaped discussions of late medieval marriage, John Gower’s work, especially his Confessio Amantis, has been crucial to critical debates about medieval love and marriage. As Elizabeth Porter has shown, marriage functions as a miniature image of political community in the mirror for princes section of John Gower’s Confessio Amantis, and Lynn Staley has recently demonstrated the importance of marriage to a number of Gower’s other works. I have chosen to focus on Gower’s Traité pour Essampler les Amantz Marietz in my second chapter because it is in this poem that Gower most thoroughly explores the sacramental model and here that Gower ties marriage not to the governance of the realm but to the values of his own social position. The Traité appears exclusively domestic in subject but reveals its social politics by deliberately reworking the traditional genres of romance and sermons, creating a new ideology from the materials of aristocratic and clerical culture. In contrast to the paradigms of aristocratic romance, heroes such as Tristan and Ulysses are revealed to be domestic horrors, and it is the private world of sexual conduct, rather than the public world of military honor, that most determines masculine virtue. Revising medieval clichés of female virtue and vice familiar from clerical misogyny, the tales value marriage over chastity and shift moral responsibility for sexual practices from women to men. Gower replaces the three estates with the three grades of chastity and implies that anyone who is morally superior in marriage can be of the highest status. While presented as a classless secular model of male moral virtue, with the prologue addressed to “everyone in general” (“a tout le monde en general”) and envoy “to the community of the whole world” (“Al université de tout le monde”), in fact the ballads of the Traité participate in a new social vision for the emergent upper middle strata of society and reveal the ideological roots of the public voice of Ri-cardian poetry in a new masculinized vision of private life.

My third chapter addresses the depiction of marriage in the N-Town plays through the context of the crucial role that Mary and Joseph played
in the development of a sacramental definition of marriage. By staging the wedding of the holy couple, “The Marriage of Mary and Joseph” invites comparison between the marriage sacrament and the play’s own dramatic form, calling attention to the way that defining a wedding as an exchange of vows made marriage a uniquely lay sacrament in which priestly participation was not essential. Similarly, in “The Trial of Mary and Joseph,” marriage becomes a model for a sacramental drama sanctifying lay piety, as Mary is exonerated from accusations of adultery by the staging of a truth test, modeled on the linguistic sacrament of marriage. This chapter includes an analysis of “Joachim and Anna,” which invokes contemporary controversy about the role of laypeople in religious practices by placing a married couple, rather than Church authority, at the center of religious practice, reflecting the lay pious sensibility of the guild members who probably staged the drama. These N-Town plays show that marriage was not only a domestic practice, but also a site of ideological contestation in late medieval England, marking complex fissures and tensions in the fabric of East Anglian religious life.

My fourth chapter argues that marriage is central to Margery Kempe’s attempts to reconcile her spiritual ambitions with her lay bourgeois values. *The Book of Margery Kempe* both imagines a marriage ideology consistent with bourgeois values and uses marriage to formulate bourgeois ideology. I explore ways that *The Book* aspires to the genre of hagiography, depicting marital sex as horribly oppressive and unclean, a portrayal in conflict with the depiction of her marriage elsewhere in the text as conforming to companionate bourgeois norms. Behind this tension in the portrait of Kempe’s marriage, I argue, is the split in theology between a definition of marriage based in sexual relations, which emphasized the marital debt, and a sacramental definition based in love, which had its roots in the politics of the conflict between the clerical and the lay authority. For Margery, marriage becomes linked to the construction of subjectivity and to the privacy oriented to a public audience typically seen to characterize the bourgeois values of a later period. Like the other texts in this study, from Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* to the N-Town Mary plays, *The Book of Margery Kempe* appears to adapt marriage in unusual ways, but Margery’s revision of mystical marriage is less the work of an eccentric individual than part of a larger body of writings, authored by and directed to the members of the emergent lay middle strata of society who appropriated clerical culture for their own ends.