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IN BED WITH THE VICTORIANS

The Life-Cycle of Working-Class Marriage

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Acknowledgements

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Contents

Abbreviations

NRO	Norfolk Record Office
SRO	Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch
TNA	The National Archives, Kew

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Victorian Working-Class Marriage and the Marital Bed

Abstract In this introduction, the case is set for using the marital bed to examine the experience of marriage and marital relations among the Victorian working class. First unpicking the complicated definition of working-class marriage at this time, the introduction then briefly explores the burgeoning historiography of the Early Modern and long eighteenth-century marital bed before locating the Victorian working-class marital bed and its inhabitants in the coroners' inquests—both the original records and the ensuing local newspaper reports. The introduction then discusses the scope of the book, highlighting the importance of location and the need to broaden the definition of the 'working class' in order to better understand the minutiae of inter-personal relationships and individual experiences existing within the walls of these wide-ranging homes.

Keywords Coroners' inquests · Marriage · Marital bed · Patriarchy Victorian · Working class

The term 'bed', which at the time was generally used to refer to the bedding or the mattress rather than the bedstead, is used as a broad category in this book to encompass the wide range of bedsteads, mattresses, and makeshift beds used to accommodate married couples in the Victorian working-class home.

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In traversing the marital beds, quasi-marital beds, and post-marital beds of the Victorian working class, this book examines the experience of marriage and marital relations through the course of the marital life-cycle. Using coroners' inquests—an incredibly underutilised source amongst Victorianists—*In Bed with the Victorians* is able to access what has thus far been hidden from view in the homes of the Victorian working class, principally its bedrooms and other sleeping spaces. With death a regular visitor to the working-class home, coroners' inquests frequently make reference to the marital bed and to the goings on both within and around its bedsheets. The marital bed has been chosen as the domestic object of this study because of its focal point in Victorian working-class marriage, both symbolically and in terms of shared everyday experience. This bed was where a couple's marriage was consummated, their children were conceived and born, where they conversed, quarrelled, and fought, and, of course, it was where they slept side by side until parted by separation or more commonly death. Thus, an exposure of the marital bed is vital to understanding the experiences and gender dynamics of the Victorian working-class marriage.

Marriage was a typical path in many working-class lives in the Victorian period.[1] It is important, however, to first define what is meant by the term 'marriage' in the scope of this book. The definition of 'marriage' among the Victorian working class is rather complex as it came in various guises. By the beginning of the Victorian era, most working-class marriages were formed in a legally binding union either through the Church or through a civil ceremony.[2] Yet, it must be noted that often as a result of couples not being immediately in a position to afford the marriage ceremony, numerous legal marriages among the Victorian working class were preceded by a short period of cohabitation and thus also followed the formation of the first marital bed.[3]

However, the couples inhabiting the marital beds explored in this book consist not just of those legally married, or those merely cohabiting briefly prior to the marriage ceremony. In this 'era of mandatory marriage' (a phrase coined by Gillis),[4] long-term cohabitation, though difficult to quantify, was still prevalent particularly among the lower strata of the working class. For an array of reasons, some working-class couples chose to shun legal marriage entirely. Not wishing to line the pockets of the clergy, itinerant employment not being conducive to the ties of marriage, poverty, local and occupational customs, family disdain, the age of the couple, being able to make an easy escape from a difficult

relationship, or merely just not seeing marriage as 'worth their while', all resulted in such informal unions.[5] The beds that these, and the following couples, inhabit are referred to in this book as 'quasi-marital beds'.

Meanwhile, other working-class couples cohabiting out of the bounds of marriage did so because they were still legally married to someone else. 'Self-divorce' on the breakdown of marriage was a typical practice among the Victorian working class, with legal divorce—even where there was just cause—simply being beyond financial reach.[6] Thus, having separated from their legal spouse it was common among this class to move onto marriage-like relationships and even to begin a new family. In most cases, spouses would enter what was legally considered to be, as Ginger S. Frost terms them, 'adulterous unions', while others—under the impression they were released from their marital vows entirely because of the behaviour of a spouse or simply having no regard for the law—committed bigamy.[7] All these cohabitees usually viewed themselves as 'man and wife', as did often their neighbours. Additionally, female spouses in these unions, along with their children, usually took the man's name—at least among themselves, if not in legal documentation.[8] Such relationships form much of the discussion in Chap. 5.

Regardless of whether these unions were legal or some form of quasi-marriage, our understanding of working-class marriage in the Victorian period has thus far largely only been understood in terms of the female spouse's experience. Having mostly been situated in the scholarship of the lives of working-class women—as housewives and mothers—the male, as Julie-Marie Strange asserts in her work addressing the gap in working-class fatherhood, is either marginalised in terms of his breadwinner role or portrayed in 'a negative context'.[9] Marriage in these texts is often presented as a struggle between the sexes, with the husband frequently only discussed in terms of the violence he meted out to his wife—if, indeed, he was at home at all.[10] This book does not deny the existence of such volatile marital relations and they are the subject of Chap. 4. Yet, in order to get a more complete picture of Victorian working-class marriage and marital relations, it is vital that husband and wife are understood in terms of their shared experience not just at times of marital strife but throughout the life-cycle of marriage.

In Bed with the Victorians examines Victorian working-class marriage by focusing upon the marital bed, a domestic item that symbolised their union and was a space distinctly inhabited by both husband and wife. Spaces, objects, and activities in the working-class home were seen, as

Ellen Ross states, to be 'sharply divided by gender'.[11] The parlour, for example, was seen as mother's domain, whereas father carved out his position in the home through the chair he inhabited and his place at the tea-table.[12] Yet, as Megan Doolittle has recently shown, such spaces and objects can neither be viewed as entirely feminine or masculine, but instead 'held a particular place in family life … reflecting [for example] relationships of gender between husband and wife'.[13] The 'feminised' marital bed is also complicated in this way. Certainly, while there are a number of references in the coroners' inquests of the marital bed being referred to by the household's children as 'mother's bed', not one has been uncovered referencing 'father's bed'. In numerous societies it was customary for women to bring to their marriage the marital bed and bedding—the trousseau, 'bottom drawer', or providan.[14] Even something as simple as the making of the bed in 'a properly ordered household' was seen as a distinctly female task.[15] Meanwhile, at certain points of the marital life-cycle—notably childbirth—the marital bed became an exclusively female space. Nonetheless, the marital bed was in general inhabited by both husband and wife throughout much of the course of the marital life-cycle and even when a spouse was not present it does not mean that gender relations cannot be revealed between its sheets. *In Bed with the Victorians* asserts that the marital bed was a dynamic site of marital relations and thus has much to reveal on Victorian working-class marriage.

Approaches to Marriage and the Marital Bed

The approach used in this book is one that has burgeoned among historians in recent years; that is, the use of domestic spaces and domestic objects to form a greater understanding of gender and inter-personal relations. The marital bed is one such object that has been a matter of this historical inquiry, demonstrating its importance in understanding the experience of marriage in England across the centuries. Historians of the Early Modern period, long eighteenth century, and the Georgian era—Laura Gowing, Amanda Flather, Amanda Vickery, Joanne Begiato, and Angela McShane—have shown the elite and middling marital bed to be both an important site and object for understanding marriage and marital conflict. Just as this bed was the scene of intimacy, conversation, and increasingly private refuge, so too was it the locus of quarrels, violence, adultery, and marital breakdown.[16] Moreover, it has even been

demonstrated how the bed itself could be used by spouses as a tool of control and abuse, through the denial of sleep and even the destruction of the marital bed itself in an overt attack on marriage.[17]

Moving into the Victorian and Edwardian period, Jane Hamlett's chapter on 'Material Marriage' in her book *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class Families in England, 1850–1910* (2010) scrutinises the middle-class 'marital bedroom with dressing room attached'. Exploring this domestic interior, Hamlett details how middle-class married couples negotiated this space and the impact that the dressing room had upon marital intimacy.[18] Hamlett also addresses the consequence of death upon the middle-class home, exploring the surviving spouse's material, domestic, and emotional existence thereafter.[19] Meanwhile, Hilary Hinds, in her study of changing consumption from the marital bed to twin beds in relation to modern marriage, challenges the perception of these beds as symbolising 'separateness' and instead argues the twin beds' importance in understanding the growth of companionate marriage in the first half of the twentieth century.[20]

The study of material goods in order to explore familial relationships is also found in recent scholarship which enters the Victorian and Edwardian working-class home. Both Megan Doolittle and Julie-Marie Strange in their analysis of fatherhood through furniture—father's chair, grandfather clocks, and the tea-table—recorded in life stories, have revealed much on the gendered and inter-personal relationships existing in these homes.[21] *In Bed with the Victorians* continues with this approach, moving out of the living spaces of the Victorian working-class home and entering its sleeping spaces, thus far rarely traversed as a result of the supposed paucity of sources that grant access to this nocturnal space. Through this, it brings Victorian working-class marriage, as experienced by both husband and wife, into the frame by focusing upon the marital bed.

Locating the Victorian Working-Class Marital Bed

Addressing the significant gap in the history of Victorian working-class marriage and marital relations, *In Bed with the Victorians* uses coroners' inquests—both the original coroners' records and the detailed reports in local newspapers—to gain privileged access to their marital beds. A range of legal records, including coroners' inquests, are commonly used by medievalists, early modernists, and historians of the long eighteenth