

Cooper, Kate, *The Fall of the Roman Household*

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Kate Cooper explores the fall of the Roman Empire through the continuity and change of the marital relationship. Focussing on late antiquity (fourth to sixth centuries) she provides invaluable insight into the changes in marriage laws and customs, recognising the role Christianity played in its transformation. This challenges the persistent idea that marriage, having been a secular institution, was not truly influenced by Christian ideals until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. She posits that early Christian ideals influenced secular society and its institutions through a focus on ethical, not theological, matters and the evolution in marriage in this earlier period have been largely overlooked. Her approach to the matter is through a detailed analysis of a late fifth- or early sixth-century text *Ad Gregoriam in palatio*, a conduct manual written for a woman by a now unknown author, known as John. What is striking about this text is that it is written for a woman who exercised power and could be considered accountable to God for her actions. It does not just recommend wifely obedience but argues for the woman as *miles Christi* to contain the abuses of the powerful. This text is analysed in relation to other texts of the period, like Ferrandus of Carthage's "Letter to Reginus", grounding the study quite firmly in its literary context. A copy of the text in translation is included in the appendix.

The book is divided into five chapters, the first three devoted to the role of Christianity in changing the socio-political context of late antiquity. This provides background to better interpret the *Ad Gregoriam*. The opening chapter called "The

Battle of this Life” draws attention to how the seemingly inconsequential decisions of daily life are likely to have shaped the changing social patterns of the late Roman Empire. It includes a description of fourth-century conduct literature in which the image of the soldier of Christ was prominent. By the fourth century, this image had developed a particularly female application. In “The Obscurity of Eloquence”, Cooper considers the role of householders as patrons, proposing that a lay senatorial sub-culture shaped the discussion of Christian ethics. The idea of subculture is important to Cooper as she suggests this, in part, accounts for the paucity of texts that have survived from this time. Their creation was so specific to the contemporary ideas and concerns, that their idiomatic style and meaning did not easily transcend the centuries. This has significance for the way the *Ad Gregoriam* needs to be read. The next chapter discusses the economic importance of the rural estates for Roman society and their managerial dependence on women. This focus of the role of the *domina* provides a rationale for the provision of a conduct manual to a woman like Gregoria.

The next chapter shifts from the wider socio-political context of late antiquity to looking specifically at marriage. It starts by contrasting the role of the woman as a liminal figure in Roman marriage, answerable to the *potestas* of her father. The ideal of a permanent marital bond had been wholly alien to Roman thought. Reciprocal *pietas* between children and parents, not the union of the conjugal pair, stood at the centre of the Roman institution of the *familia*. This *potestas* of the father was undermined by the Christian demand for the *potestas* of a man over his wife’s body (and her *potestas* over his) giving a husband greater control over his wife’s affairs. That there was such a dramatic change in attitude to marriage at this time is supported by the introduction of documents used to register marriage with church

authorities, a practice recommended by the Emperor Justinian for all marriages of worth. I found the discussion of the meaning of chastity and the role of sex within marriage in this chapter particularly enlightening and useful. Marriage is often treated as a less important pathway for women in this period, but this chapter reinforced the idea that early Christian marriage could be sexually active and be defended as a spiritual calling. This association of sexual activity and a spiritual calling contradicts many approaches to marriage in the medieval period. In the final chapter, entitled “The Invisible Enemy”, Cooper looks at the role of early medieval spiritual warfare as based on the investigation of the self. She proposes that this was a vital part of early Christians’ ethical approach to life, as can be seen by numerous calls to mass self-reflection in times of crisis. This evolution in conjugal relations in tandem with self-examination is demonstrated to lie at the heart of the *ad Gregoriam*.

There is a lot to like about this book. It is a very detailed exploration of shifts in one of the most fundamental aspects of social life – the conjugal relationship. Situating this shift within the context of the changing socio-political landscape of late antiquity, Cooper provides a cogent backdrop to her discussion of the aims and purpose of the text. There are copious footnotes throughout providing both extra material to be followed up and bibliographic details. I recommend this book for all those interested in the history of marriage, gender issues and to all students interested in the conjunction of Christian and Roman values.

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