



Breaking the Bonds: Marital Discord in Pennsylvania, 1730-1830 (The American Social Experience)

Merril D. Smith

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"In *Breaking The Bonds*, Merrill Smith establishes the ambitious goal of determining 'what kind of problems arose in troubled marriages' and of analyzing 'how men and women coped with marital discord.' . . . To accomplish this, Smith studied hundreds of divorce petitions, other legal documents, newspapers, almshouse dockets, and prescriptive literature. She concludes that, as in the present day, married couples fought and parted over sex, money, and abuse."

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The late eighteenth century marked a period of changing expectations about marriage: companionship came to coexist as a norm alongside older patriarchal standards, men and women began to see their roles in more disparate ways, expectations about the satisfaction of marriage grew, and gender distinctions between husbands and wives became more complicated. Marital strife was an inevitable outcome of these changing expectations. The difficulties that rose, including abuse, a lack of sexual communication, and domestic violence (frequently brought on by alcoholism) differ little from those with which couples struggle today.

Breaking The Bonds is an imaginative and original account that brings to light a strongly communicative world in which neighbors knew of, discussed, and even came to the aid of those locked in unhappy marriages.

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