



BOOK REVIEW

**Amy Harris, *Being single in Georgian England: families, households, and the unmarried***

**(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). Pages xii–xxi, 1–247 + 8 figures and plates, £70.00 hardback.**

Lloyd Bonfield

New York Law School

(Received 18 December 2023; accepted 18 December 2023)

From a first glance at the book's title, *Being Single*, the reader expects a work that explores the uncoupled (that is those unmarried for much or all of their adult life) in Georgian England. The monograph commences with an introductory chapter that does provide a very useful gloss on books and articles which have explored the lives of single men and women during the period, and considers what it was like to be unattached in past time. Thereafter, indeed and for the rest of the volume, though, the thrust of the narrative changes; the reader is presented with micro-history, a detailed treatment of the Sharps, a not uninteresting, but not a particularly remarkable family, but one that has left a rich documentary history. One cannot say easily the Sharps of ... since as the map of their residences (Figure 3.2) illustrates, they at times lived from north to south, from near the Scots border to London. While the narrative is interesting and well-presented, there is much more attention paid to their journey through the century, than there is to being single in Georgian England. In short, the central theme diverges from its initial course; gears are shifted: being single is abandoned in favor of presenting the trials and tribulations of the members of the Sharp family. To be sure, the lens seems at times to return to a focus on the uncoupled, and what life was like for them. But make no mistake: this is a book about the Sharps. And that is the appeal of the volume.

Some of the Sharp family members observed are indeed uncoupled for swathes of their adult life. If it is better to be married than to burn, many members of the Sharp family risked the flames. They seemed to have married later than most English folk of their demographic cohort. Why? Why indeed? As with much of micro-history, we can follow and we can learn, but we cannot, as Professor Harris notes, explain: 'The Sharps and their contemporaries married or not due to a complex mixture of personality, chance, economic pressures and class and family expectations. Agency and decision-making are always constrained or colored by these factors.' (p. 67). The same conclusion is drawn when the author asks whether and why some of the uncoupled remained celibate. Did they prefer solitude; did they see no alternative; did women wish to escape the tyranny of men? All plausible

explanations, yet no conclusion is demonstrable even from the voluminous record that the Sharp family produced (pp. 92–95).

The central question raised seems to be whether being uncoupled was a miscue, a ‘failure to launch,’ or was it volitional? Professor Harris notes that historians tend to regard coupling as to be expected in past time. It was likely more prevalent than in our own time when, given the myriad of possible living arrangements, many still remain single. But, as Prof. Harris suggests, perhaps we should abandon the notion that being coupled is ‘normal.’ If so, we need not strain to find external explanations for their choice or their fate.

Prof. Harris regards marriage as a vertical arrangement between male and female. She argues, and quite effectively, that being single in Georgian England meant being enmeshed in ‘lateral’ arrangements with their relatives rather than in the vertical. Here is where micro-history meets the theme of being single. Relations between the uncoupled and their married relatives are described in detail. To be sure, there are a number of Sharp nuclear families, particularly over time, but they seem to play with, work with, bond with, interact with the single members of this extended Sharp family. Aunts and uncles, unmarried siblings, segue in and out of households. They play important roles. Maybe the Sharps could not have met with the success that they achieved if all members of the extended group actually married. That is where the economics of the individual households loom large. Sacrificing the joys of marriage may not have been a conscious decision on the part of the single members. Nevertheless, the uncoupled served the coupled members of the Sharp family well economically. And the reverse was the case; could the uncoupled have survived as gentry without being integrated into the households of their married kin?

Finally, despite quibbles over whether the monograph is about being single or being a Sharp, it was a joy to read. The presentation is well-organised. And the prose is elegant. Prof. Harris acknowledges her University’s Faculty Publications Service for their assistance in revising. (Would that I had one!) Perhaps Prof. Harris’s was being gracious. However both should be commended.

doi:10.1017/S026841602300036X