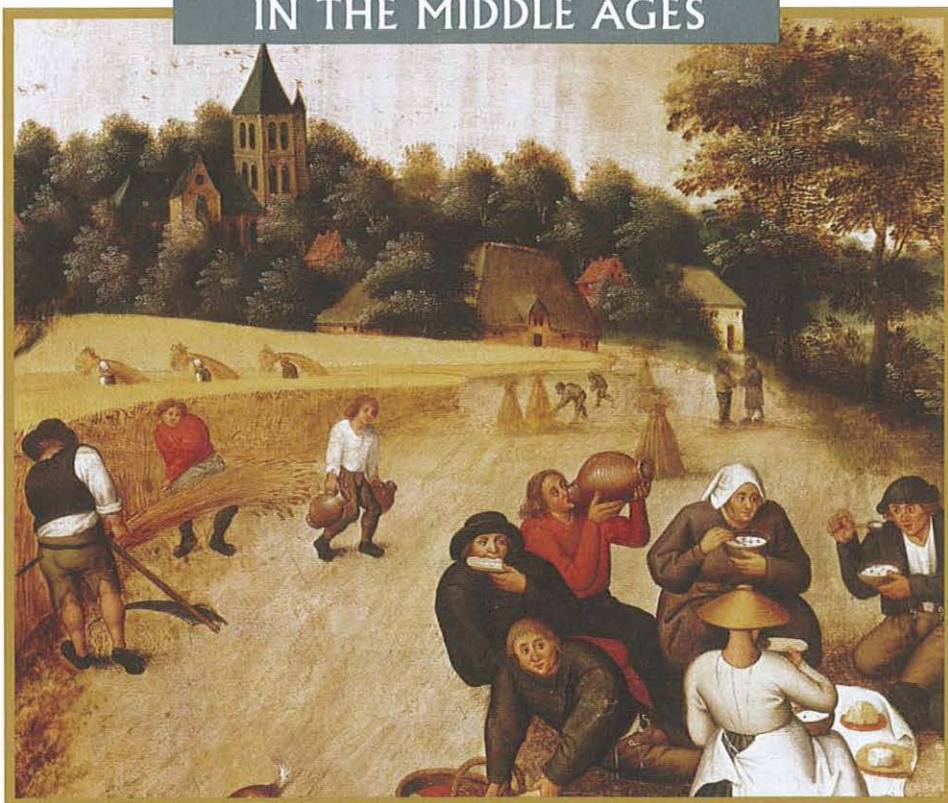




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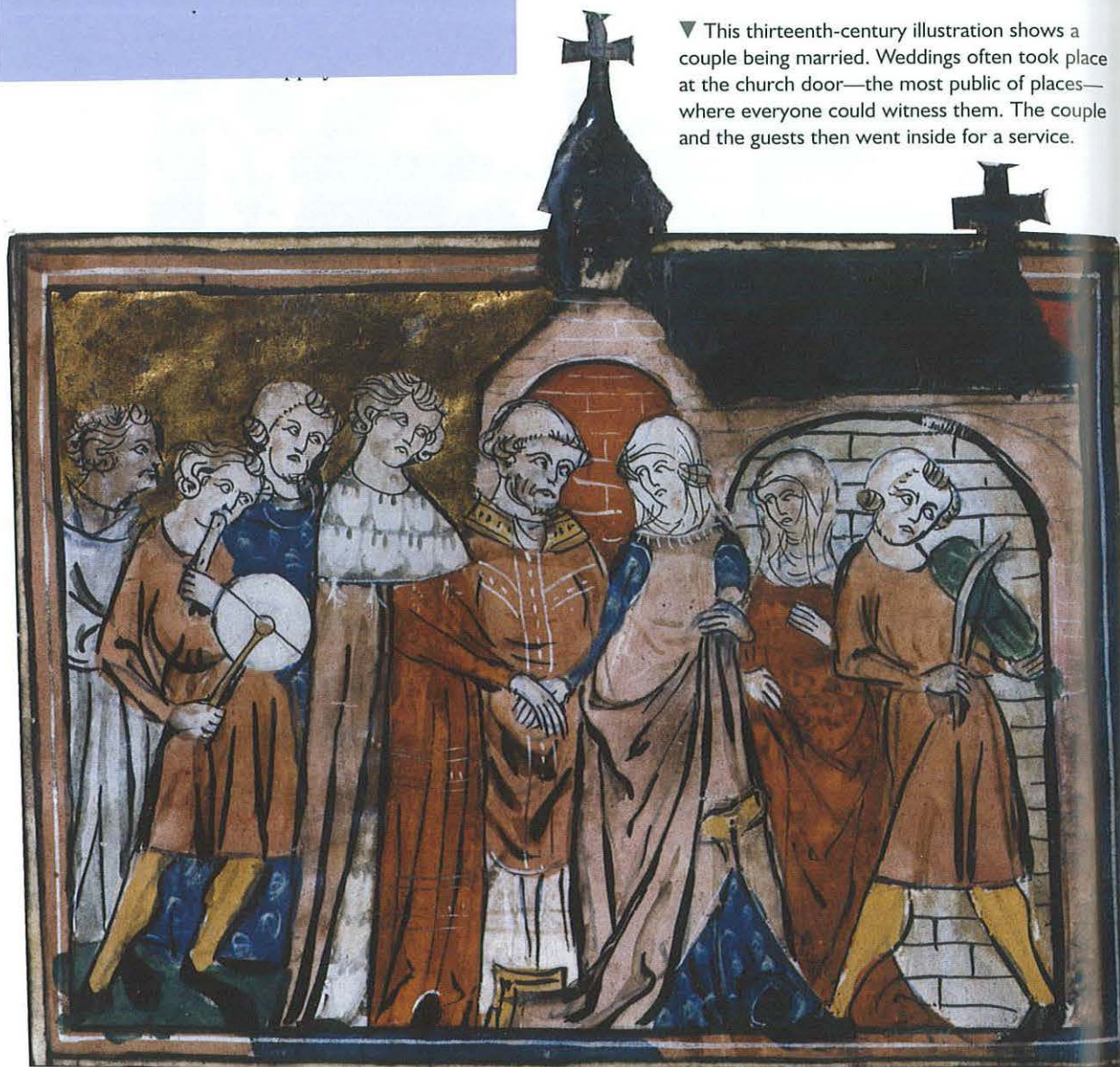
Gareth Stevens
Publishing



Marriage

Legally, medieval marriages were not relationships between equals. Wives were expected to obey their husbands, and husbands were allowed to beat disobedient wives. Many tales from the period tell of shrewish wives and cruel husbands. Occasionally, wives were afraid of their husbands. Nevertheless, many couples in arranged marriages developed real affection for each other. The reality for people at all levels of society was that to run a household and prosper, husband and wife had to cooperate.

▼ This thirteenth-century illustration shows a couple being married. Weddings often took place at the church door—the most public of places—where everyone could witness them. The couple and the guests then went inside for a service.



A HUSBAND'S LAST WORDS

"More write I not unto you, but the Holy Trinity keep you now, dear and trusty wife. Here I make an end, wherefore I pray you, as my trust is wholly in you, over all other creatures, that this last will be fulfilled, and all other that I ordained at home, for all the love that ever was between man and woman."

Will of Stephen Thomas, 1417–1418¹¹

For nobles, marriages were practical matters and carefully arranged. For the high nobility, marriages were political. Payment of a dowry could mean losing control of large territories for one family and gaining control for another. A marriage could cement an important alliance. Lesser lords were also concerned with gaining and maintaining lands, wealth, and status. Sometimes the fathers of both bride and groom arranged a marriage when their children were very young. The selection of an appropriate husband for his daughter was one of the father's jobs. Another important concern was to provide a good dowry, so his daughter would not have to marry below her rank. Among noble families, the higher their rank, the larger the dowry they expected to receive from their brides.

Widows who wished to remarry generally had more freedom to choose their husbands than they

had had with a first marriage. Men who were financially independent could choose their own wives. They often chose brides who were much younger than they were.

Peasants were freer than nobles to marry for love. The wealth and status of the spouse's family were taken into account, but the spouse's character was just as important. Young men and women courted and got to know each other, then asked for their parents' blessing. Before they could marry, men had to acquire enough land to support a family, which usually happened when their fathers died or retired. Thus men usually married later than women. The bride's father usually gave a dowry of money or household or farm goods. Sometimes single women saved their wages for several years until they had enough money for their dowries.

ADVICE TO HUSBANDS AND WIVES

"And she must go to market, to sell . . . [the surplus products]. And also to buy things needed by the household, and to give her husband a true account of what she has spent. And if the husband should go to market to buy or sell, than he, too, must account to his wife in the same way. For if they deceive each other, they deceive themselves, and are unlikely to prosper."

Anthony Fitzherbert, Boke of Husbandrie, c. 1500¹²