

Caregivers, Disability, and Work in Late Medieval France

Prof. Dr. Aleksandra “Sasha” Pfau
(Hendrix College, Conway, AR, USA)

In 1415, Marie Lamargiere was imprisoned for the death of her husband, Symon Brevel. In explaining the situation, Marie revealed that Symon had been blind for eighteen years, and Marie performed all of their household tasks. One evening in September when Marie returned from their vineyard laden with grapes, she found the door closed. After forcing it open, Marie found that her husband had overturned all the grapes she had harvested. Their resulting argument escalated so much that Symon died. Marie Lamargiere’s story reveals some of the expectations of caregivers in the fifteenth century, and the ways that some families struggled to fulfill them. For eighteen years, Marie maintained her household, taking on tasks traditionally performed by men. This work took a physical and emotional toll that erupted when her husband angered her. This paper examines legal records that allow us a glimpse of the ways that medieval caregivers tried and sometimes failed to navigate their loved one’s needs and their own, arguing that the disabled in the Middle Ages were integrated into their communities, but also further suggesting that the stress of care could create moments of conflict, generally revolving around concerns about labor, specifically food production and consumption. These cases reveal that expectations of labor, both on the part of the individual with a disability and on the part of the caregiver, created significant tensions within the household.

Indeed, the argument between Marie Lamargiere and Symon Brevel highlighted his blindness and his lack of labor as a particular area of conflict. Though there are many medieval narratives about arguments between husbands and wives about their mutual responsibilities, Marie Lamargiere’s anger was particularly directed at Symon’s inability to help her with traditionally male household tasks and indeed, at that particular moment, his lack of awareness of her needs in leaving the door shut and overturning the grapes. Medieval narratives about care generally revolve around food production and consumption. Marie Lamargiere was working in the vineyards harvesting grapes to make wine that would be a staple of their diet and, depending on the size of their vineyard, a source of income. Their argument was instigated by Symon’s inability to help with the harvest, but more importantly it was about his unwillingness to perform tasks that were well within his capabilities. Marie knew that Symon was inside when she arrived home laden with grapes and had expected him to be dealing with the harvest she had left behind earlier in the day. Instead, the vat full of grapes she had already harvested had been dumped and spread all over the house and Symon was just sitting there. According to Marie, Symon called her names, attacking Marie’s chastity and arguing that despite her work she was not a good wife to him. Marie disputed his insult, telling him it was not true. In contrast, Marie’s own insulting words focus on the relationship between her husband’s blindness and her own difficult work, calling him a “blind man” for whom she labors. Though of course we are only able to access Marie’s side of this story, and it is quite likely that Symon would have a different version, it is clear that these kinds of pressures would have been

recognizable to their contemporaries as sufficient cause for her anger, if not for the murder of her husband.

Other legal records suggest that familial care was fairly common, and that many individuals with an impairment still participated in household tasks, including the grape harvest. They also reveal that tensions over expectations of labor and food production could erupt into violence against the caregiver as well as against those with a disability. For example, when he began to approach his 80th year, Jehan de Marsay placed himself and his wife under the guardianship of his son-in-law, Guillaume Carmenteuil, creating a contract that ensured they would be provided with food, drink, and clothing while they lived and their son-in-law would live with them and maintain their properties in exchange for a future inheritance. Jehan felt that they were mistreated, but also importantly that Guillaume did not perform sufficient labor in taking care of their properties or providing for their needs. This led to a dispute during which Jehan killed his son-in-law.

Rather than creating narratives of exclusion, isolation, and abandonment of the disabled, all of these cases show us people who are included and in many cases intimately involved in their communities. However, they also reveal the tensions that arose in the families providing that care, tensions that often erupted in violent ways. Labor was central to all of these conflicts. This is true both in terms of the expectations of caregivers to labor on behalf of those living with a disability and in terms of the expectations of the caregivers that those with a disability would work within their capacities. Tensions arose when these expectations were not met on either side.