
In a book that has already stirred up much discussion and is bound to stimulate more, Susan Reynolds campaigns with great learning, analytical skill, and polemical zeal against the study of “feudalism in its ‘narrow sense’ of relations within the noble class” (3) in medieval England, France, Germany, and Italy. Reynolds’s primary targets are thus historians such as F. L. Ganshof, who in 1944 canonized feudalism as “one of the great institutions of European history,” defining it as “a body of institutions creating and regulating the obligations of obedience and service—mainly military service—on the part of a free man (the vassal) towards another free man (the lord), and the obligations of protection and maintenance on the part of the lord with regard to his vassal. The obligation of maintenance had usually as one of its effects the grant by the lord to his vassal of a unit of real property known as a fief” (*Feudalism*, trans. Philip Grierson, 3d English ed. [New York, 1961], p. xvi). Totally rejecting this narrow model of feudalism, Reynolds sees greater value in what she loosely terms “feudalism in its [broader] Marxist sense, which involves not only relations between nobles and peasants but consideration of the whole economic structure of society and the reasons for economic and social change.” However, she still complains that “the study of the broader subject seems to be impeded by its inheritance from the narrower one of the idea that fiefs and vassalage were central and defining institutions of medieval European society” (3). She therefore attacks models of “feudal society” such as the one formulated in 1939 by Marc Bloch, who treated as “fundamental features” of feudalism in the broad sense not only a peasantry, a warrior élite, fragmented authority, and attenuated forms of family and state, but also vassalage and the fief (*Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon [Chicago, 1961], 446).

Because Reynolds denies that the concepts of vassalage and the fief are “helpful to the understanding of medieval history” (2), she considers Ganshof’s models of feudalism to be intellectually bankrupt and finds serious flaws in broader models such as Bloch’s:

Fiefs and vassalage, as they are generally defined by medieval historians today, are post-medieval constructs. . . . Historians often refer to both fiefs and vassals when neither word is in their sources. They sometimes refer to them in ways that, irrespective of terminology, seem to me to distort the relations of property and politics that the sources record. Even when the historians follow the terminology and take pains to establish the phenomena recorded, they tend to fit their findings into a framework of interpretation that was devised in the sixteenth century and elaborated in the seventeenth and eighteenth. (2)
Instead of reformulating the concepts of fief and vassalage, Reynolds rejects them both because “We cannot understand medieval society . . . if we see it through seventeenth- or eighteenth-century spectacles. Yet every time we think of fiefs and vassals we do just that” (3). She also dismisses “[t]he idea of ‘tenure’ as distinct from ‘ownership’” as “inappropriate” for the period before 1100 (62) and denies not only that vassalage was “the cement of medieval society” (7) but also that “purely interpersonal bonds” such as lordship or kinship ties were the main integrating forces in early medieval society.

Although *Fiefs and Vassals* is admittedly “rather negative in tone” (475) and is not meant to create “a new model into which evidence is to be fitted as it has been fitted for centuries into the model of feudalism” (482), Reynolds complements her critique of previous scholarship on fiefs and vassals not simply with proposals for further research but with an alternative model of medieval society from which she virtually eliminates not only fiefs and vassals but also fragmented authority, sharp class divisions, and kinship. Interpersonal bonds, she believes, “were not the whole story nor even most of the story” (476) in constituting medieval societies, which were held together mainly by effective governments ruling real states (26–27), by a concept of “the public welfare” (25), and by other widely shared values and norms, including “a belief in hierarchy, obedience, and loyalty on the one hand and a belief in custom, immanent justice, mutuality of obligations, and collective judgement on the other” (34–35). Although she divides medieval society, for practical purposes, into three vaguely defined “categories” of people—nobles, laborers, and members of a large intermediate group—she abandons the concept of class, seeing medieval society as marked by “infinite gradations or layers rather than . . . wide social gulfs” (38–40, 476). Her suggestions for further research include studies treating “high politics and actual events” as determinants of social structure (481–82). To replace analyses of vassalage and fiefs, she favors research on “a whole range of different social and political relations” and “a whole range of separate [real property] rights or obligations—as many of each as one can think of” (481).

Whether or not Reynolds succeeds in imposing either her research agenda or her provisional model of medieval society on others, her book is important as a critique of received ideas about fiefs and vassals and is particularly interesting for the period before 1100, on which this review focuses with particular reference to France. In arguing persuasively that many previous historians have misrepresented medieval ideas about political relationships and rights to land, she shows just how little evidence supports the familiar generalizations about vassals, fiefs, feudal law, feudal theory, and the feudal system that have been endlessly recycled by many legal historians of feudal institutions, by some (though hardly all) writers on feudal society, and by innumerable teachers and textbook writers. Vigilantly scrutinizing modern work for inaccurate, tendentious readings of medieval texts and for any trace of the idea that “fiefs and vassalage were central and defining institutions of medieval European society” (3), Reynolds convincingly criticizes those who have treated lordship and kinship as “mutually exclusive alternatives” (25), made incoherent distinctions between “public and private relations and obligations” (25), defined vassalage “in terms of the sentiments it is supposed to embody” (27), assumed that “vassalage was essentially defined by its rituals of initiation” (28), and, above all, conceptualized vassalage so loosely that they find examples...
of it everywhere (33). Her discussion of fiefs shows that “Not until after 1100 were the properties of nobles and other free men normally described as fiefs, nor did the word fief begin to denote anything like a consistent category of property—in so far, considering its aberrant use in England, as one can say that it ever did” (59). Reynolds concludes that “in so far as anything like feudo-vassalic institutions [ever] existed, they were the product not of weak and unbureaucratic government in the early middle ages but of the increasingly bureaucratic government and expert law that began to develop from about the twelfth century” (478–79). She also asserts that before 1100, “the standard form of property for nobles and other free men . . . was something much more like the common modern idea of ‘freehold property’ than the modern idea of ‘feudal property’” (73). The rules of fiefholding that emerged after 1100 “seem to derive,” she thinks, “not from social norms of the lay nobility in the earlier middle ages, but from the practices that the clergy devised to protect the property of the church” (64). Ganshof, in other words, was wrong in thinking that early medieval sources revealed “the general principles” which, by regulating “the relationship of vassal to lord and the custom of fiefs,” largely regulated the life of the medieval nobility long before those principles were ever articulated in lawbooks and court records (Feudalism, 68).

Although Reynolds repeatedly criticizes contemporary scholars as well as earlier ones for misrepresenting the history of fiefs and vassals before 1100 and, in some cases, for reproducing an unsatisfactory model of medieval society, she will not provoke a clear-cut confrontation between defenders of the narrow view of feudalism, which present-day historians rarely espouse in toto, and supporters of Fiefs and Vassals, which raises so many distinct and debatable historiographical, empirical, and theoretical issues that no reader should feel compelled to accept or reject the book’s entire thesis. Reynoldsism is really several different theses linked loosely together by a deep antipathy to the study of feudalism, against which Reynolds constantly reacts and sometimes overreacts. Because the narrow view of feudalism has already been rejected or bypassed by many medievalists, while the broader view has been revised in many ways since Bloch’s day, the main issue raised by Fiefs and Vassals is not whether Reynolds has convincingly undermined “the modern concepts of vassalage and the fief” (14), but how her proposals for revising Bloch’s broad model of feudalism compare with the proposed revisions of other historians. A subsidiary issue is whether a style of analysis that is so successful in demonstrating that practices once associated with vassalage and/or fiefholding were not really the products of obedience to rules of so-called feudal custom can ever produce coherent hypotheses about medieval societies or social change when the analysis turns, as Reynolds says it should, into a search for infinite gradations in medieval society, for a multitude of medieval social practices, and for as many contemporaneous ideas about practice as one can think of. Although Reynolds presents an overpowering case against older views of feudalism, her proposed revisions of those views are unpersuasive partly because she never demonstrates their superiority to other forms of revisionism and partly because the empirical evidence for them is ambiguous at best. Moreover, because Reynolds’s own proposals are also open to objections analogous to the ones she herself makes against feudalism, readers should wonder whether to follow her when she assumes the role of hyper-empiricist deconstructor of post-medieval constructs such as vassalage, fief, feudalism or class, or when she proposes to replace them with other post-medieval constructs such as government and ownership. Because
Reynolds's critique of previous work on feudal society sometimes presupposes an underlying skepticism about the entire historical project of analyzing and explaining what Bloch called "a social structure and its unifying principles" (Feudal Society, p. xx), historians more committed to that project than she is may well applaud individual tactics she uses in attacking feudalism but question her intellectual strategy of implicitly contesting the idea that medieval societies could have had unifying principles or, at least, unifying principles other than the ones she posits.

Although Reynolds tries not to attack a straw man (14, 15, 17) and finds grounds for criticizing recent scholars, her overall argument would have been more intellectually productive if, instead of organizing it around an attack on conventional views of "feudo-vassalic institutions," she had first identified herself with other historians who have attacked, revised, or bypassed those views and if she had then explained and debated her differences with them. Readers could then have identified and assessed both the distinctive features of her arguments and the views she shares with other historians. By indiscriminately attacking the work of any historian whose views she can somehow associate with "the modern concepts of vassalage and the fief" (14), Reynolds runs the risk of obscuring issues she needs to clarify. She clearly does so when discussing recent writers on medieval France, whom she criticizes for their "unanimity in using the categories of classic feudalism" (119). Even though fiefs, vassals, and feudalism still figure in recent French manuals and textbooks, Reynolds's criticism is an odd one to level at scholars such as Georges Duby, who has already done much to undermine narrow views of feudalism. Reynolds prefers broad approaches to feudalism; Duby and other French medievalists have pursued them for decades. Reynolds denies that the fief was a crucially important institution in medieval society; Duby did the same in 1978 (Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, rev. printing [Chicago, 1982], 153). Reynolds denies that "feudal anarchy" prevailed in France before 1100 (124–25); Duby did so in 1953 (La Société aux XIe et XII siècles dans la région mâconnaise [1953; rpt. Paris, 1971], 165–71). Denying that relationships between lords and men were strictly regulated by feudal contracts, Reynolds argues that they must have taken different forms depending on the social distance between the parties (31, 127); Duby made a similar argument long ago (La Société aux XIe et XII siècles, 159–65). Reynolds certainly has her differences with recent French scholars. But treating them primarily as defenders of a "common view" of fiefs, vassals, and feudalism misrepresents their work and prevents her from either using it to support her argument or else explaining precisely how and why her argument differs from theirs; the same strategy prevents readers of Fiefs and Vassals from seeing clearly that one can reject "the modern concepts of vassalage and the fief" without fully embracing Reynoldsism. In a similar but less striking way Reynolds's relentless critique of those concepts sometimes obscures the degree to which the concepts have been revised by recent English historians. Whether or not similar objections can be made to her readings of recent work on medieval Germany and Italy, her failure to consider revisionist historiography on feudalism carefully impedes her efforts to articulate her own views, whose relationship to this kind of work she never explains.

Moreover, if we start, as many other historians have, from the premise that conventional ideas about fiefs and vassals are deeply flawed and if we then ask, after considering recent work based on this premise, whether these concepts should be revised,
radically reformulated, or simply scrapped and, if scrapped, replaced with what, we can find grounds for contesting some of Reynolds's revisionist arguments about political relationships, land law, and the connection between the two. We can also gauge the extent to which her own argument involves the use of concepts that are almost as problematic as she considers fiefs, vassalage, and feudalism to be. Although Reynolds rightly emphasizes the need for caution "in deducing norms that governed lay property from records about church property" (123), this warning should apply not only to arguments about fiefs and vassals but also to the arguments of Reynolds herself, who has little evidence for her assertions about how "nobles and free men" did or did not use the term fief before 1100 (59) or about the advantages of using the term "ownership" in discussing early medieval land law. All generalizations about eleventh-century secular land law are tenuous and depend on an ability to fit the available evidence into intelligible schemas, rather than to catalogue a whole range of phenomena. The same point holds for generalizations about political relationships and about the possible connection between such relationships and claims to rights in land.

Even though Reynolds has read an astonishing amount about fiefs and vassals and has closely scrutinized a multitude of sources, some of the available evidence is hard to fit into the interpretive schemas that she proposes to substitute for vassalage and the fief. For example, her inattention to chansons de geste, as Patrick Wormald has noted (Times Literary Supplement [March 10, 1995], 12), is regrettable. Though dating from after 1100, these texts come closer than Latin sources do to documenting a lay political culture that could not have been invented out of nothing in the twelfth century. Among the cultural stereotypes that figure in chansons de geste are the lord who gives or should give land and wives to his loyal followers; and the disinherited man who seeks land and a wife. Interestingly enough, both stereotypes are invoked in the Conventum, an early eleventh-century text that Reynolds closely examines (125–27). Although this evidence cannot be neatly fitted into conventional models of fiefs and vassals, it fits just as awkwardly into the flat landscape of land-owning subjects that Reynolds substitutes for the feudal landscape of fiefholding vassals. The evidence probably fits best into a world where land is both the subject of heritable claims by those who possess it and an item of exchange and patronage that mediates political relationships among individuals or lineages.

A similar question about Reynolds’s revised model of medieval society would have arisen if she had supplemented her painstaking readings of individual charters and narrative sources with fuller discussions of the prosopographical researches other historians have used to reconstruct aristocratic political networks and show how they served as frameworks for settling disputes and exercising political power in other ways. Although no one could seriously maintain that by themselves interpersonal relationships actually constituted a political community, the formation of such networks and their maintenance over time are hard to explain without sometimes positing patron/client relationships that Reynolds finds less important than relationships between rulers and subjects. Could political groups have existed without the redistribution of land through forms of exchange that have no place in Reynolds’s landscape of rulers and land-owning subjects? In the absence of such groups, could rulers have ruled or governed (if they did govern)?

Other evidence that Reynolds discusses but does not always analyze fully is difficult
to fit into an eleventh-century world of “complete property rights, formally undivided with any superior” (150). As she points out, “[o]ne of the chief reasons for identifying property of unspecified status [in eleventh-century France] as feudal rather than alodial seems to be that the consent of a lord was recorded when it was given to a church” (146). To undermine this argument, Reynolds provides an alternative explanation for the consent of lords to gifts by people whom other historians (including the present reviewer) have represented as the lords’ tenants, though not as tenants identical to twelfth- or thirteenth-century tenants. In cases where the lords in question were counts of Anjou or Normandy, “it is surely likely,” Reynolds asserts, that they were “asked to give their consent to gifts not—or not only—because they were lords or overlords in the sense of the later law of fiefs but because they were regarded as the effective rulers of their counties. The same may well apply to some castellans or other lords” (147–48). Like many of Reynolds’s arguments, this one is effective in contesting the assumption that late twelfth-century rules of fief holding were binding in the eleventh century; but it is no more plausible than the argument that concepts of gift, counter-gift, tenure, seisin, and warranty were elements of eleventh-century legal culture. Finally, Reynolds’s argument takes no account of a common type of lawsuit in which a lord challenged a gift to a monastery on the grounds that the monks had received land from his fief or casamentum without his authorization. Reynolds could try to make sense of these disputes by arguing that the lord’s claim had a political and/or governmental basis, not a tenurial one. But the more frequently she uses this argument (139, 147, 152, 163, 288–89) the less convincing it sounds, not only because some of the lords in question seem never to have governed anything or anyone, but also because Reynolds’s concept of government is so elusive.

Although her arguments generally rest on careful documentary analyses, many of them also depend heavily on her invocation of concepts such as ruler and subject, state or government, public good, freehold tenure, and politics. Her reliance on such concepts can be puzzling because, in the absence of convincing evidence to substantiate them, she relies on assumptions about medieval society that resemble the ones she first identifies in arguments about fiefs and vassals and then demolishes. Her references to government are particularly problematic because her argument requires government to perform functions that others have assigned to political or tenurial forms of lordship. Although Reynolds acknowledges that evidence of French government is very scanty until well after 1100 (133), she insists that historians should not “deduce from the lack of records of secular government that France was a moral and political vacuum in which there was no idea of public interest” (129). Similarly, after conceding that it is “difficult to know” how much German kings were “concerned” about governing their subjects or their realm before 1100, she then maintains that “the lack of surviving administrative records, combined with the application of stereotypes about feudal government and about Germany’s inevitable disunity, may have created an exaggerated impression of local government as entirely unsupervised by a totally unbureaucratic royal government” (409). When she contends that people did not owe obedience to the king of Germany “only as the ‘feudal lord’ at the head of a hierarchy of interpersonal links of ‘vassal-age,’” she does so, not because she can present compelling evidence for this view, but rather because she considers it “perverse to suppose” the contrary (404). When she has more data, she represents eleventh-century French “government” in these terms:
At the level of castellanies or banal lordships . . . rights of government and rights of property were much less easy to distinguish than had been the case under Carolingian rule. Above that level there was in some areas very little superstructure before the twelfth century. In others, where counts or dukes established or maintained their authority, they needed to tap the wealth of their greater subjects, but, lacking the legitimacy of kingship, they had to build up loyalty, obligation, and fear on the foundation of what might at first be little more than alliance or voluntary submission. In practice the early Capetians do not seem to have had much more authority than did counts. (131)

How, then, did government differ from lordship?

Having complained that “the words vassals and vassalage imply conceptual black holes that are liable to swallow up any historical scholarship that ventures into them” (34), Reynolds uses terms such as government not so much to designate documented features of medieval society as to serve as surrogates for constructs such as feudal lordship that she wants to supplant in a revisionist model of medieval society. For feudal lords and feudal lordship, she substitutes rulers and the state; similarly she replaces vassals with subjects, feudal tenure with freehold tenure, and feudal law with norms and values. Politics serves as a residual category for practices that seem ungoverned, beyond the rule of law, or otherwise inexplicable. As she demolishes one structuralist-functionalist model of medieval society, Reynolds replaces it with another. Although her own model facilitates an attack on narrow models of feudalism, it is also vulnerable not only to the usual array of objections to structuralist-functionalist models, but also to precisely the kinds of attacks that she launches against Ganshof’s model of feudalism. If she can replace vassals and fiefs with “a whole range of different social and political relations” and “a whole range of separate [real property] rights or obligations — as many of each as one can think of” (481), she could easily replace the construct “government” with “a whole range” of power relationships.

Whether or not Fiefs and Vassals presents a methodologically consistent or consistently defensible argument about medieval society, the book is valuable as a polemic against certain forms of conventional wisdom and obscurantism that have not yet been fully expunged from medieval historiography. By simply demolishing the narrow view of feudalism, rather than following the usual course of trying to amend, marginalize, or bypass it, and by questioning other received ideas, Reynolds also puts herself in an unusually good position to formulate questions about how, without privileging fiefs and vassalage, historians can develop clearer understandings of medieval politics and law. Because her answers to these questions are both provisional and debatable and would be very hard to defend against the hyper-empirical style of deconstructive analysis she often deploys in attacking feudalism, the immediate value of her work lies in her negations, not her assertions. Yet the negations serve a positive purpose of showing how, by inventing a special, legal sphere of early medieval society lying beyond the reach of empirical investigation by non-lawyers, generations of legal historians of feudalism mystified the study of medieval history. As a long overdue exercise in demystification, Reynolds’s book is a significant achievement.

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