

# Marriage in Seventeenth-Century England: The Woman's Story

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The seventeenth century represents a fascinating period of English history, drawing the attention of whole generations of historians. This turbulent age saw three major events that had a deep impact on England's political as well as social life—the English Revolution, the Restoration of the Stuarts in 1660 and the Glorious Revolution in 1688. Amidst the turmoil of the events, people's everyday lives unfolded. While it was men's preoccupation to keep the country's political and economic affairs going, women had an indispensable, though far less public, part to play. This paper aims at providing an outline of the seventeenth-century English marriage, viewed from the woman's perspective. It touches upon topics such as concluding marriages, basic marriage values, duties of a married woman and possibilities of divorce. Attention is paid to the areas in which the seventeenth-century reality was different from today's.

In seventeenth-century England, marriage and sexual morals played a far more important social role than nowadays. A family centred around a married couple represented the basic social, economic and political unit. In the Stuart period, a husband's "rule" over his wife, children and servants was seen as an analogy to the king's reign over his people—a manifestation of a hierarchy constituted by God. A woman was regarded as the 'weaker vessel' (a phrase taken from the New Testament)—a creature physically, intellectually, morally and even spiritually inferior to a man; therefore, the man had a right to dominate her (Fraser 1981: 1).

In a society strongly influenced by Puritan values, sexual integrity and the status of a married person gave a woman respectability and social prestige. This, together with the fact that it was very difficult for women to find ways of making an independent living, meant that securing a husband was a matter of great importance.

Theoretically, it was possible for two people to marry very young. The minimum legal age was 12 years for women and 14 years for men. In addition, it was possible for the couple to get engaged at the age of 7, with the right to break off the engagement on reaching the minimum age of consent (Stone 1965: 652). However, early marriages were rather rare—the average age of the newlyweds was about 25 years.

Interestingly, the basic requirement for a legally valid marriage was not a formal consecration in a church, but the completion of a marriage contract, commonly called 'spousals'. Spousals were an act in which the bride and groom said their vows in the present tense—'*per verba de praesenti*' (Ingram 1987: 126). In a majority of cases, this procedure was accompanied by a church ceremony (banns). Yet if the marriage was concluded without witnesses and not consecrated in a church, it had the same legal validity. This practice had existed in England since the twelfth century and lasted till 1753. Not having to go through a church ceremony made it possible for lovers to marry secretly, without the knowledge of their parents. In this way, they could escape the dynastic scheming of their families.

Given its social significance, marriage was considered a matter of a larger community, not only the couple themselves. Although the number of purely arranged marriages was decreasing as opposed to the previous centuries, young women were expected to consult their choice of a partner with their parents and relatives, especially with those that intended to bestow some property on them. Generally speaking, the poorer a girl was, the greater freedom she had in choosing her future husband. But even the children of the poor were expected to ask their parents for their blessing, though money had a small part to play here.

There were several criteria which decided whether a match was ‘appropriate’. Contemporary moralists recommend that the couple should be of similar age, background, financial circumstances and religious beliefs. Concord in manners and interests was beneficial as well. The husband and wife should like and respect each other—even love each other—but they should beware of mere sexual fascination and look for inner qualities. The widespread opinion was that love came after the wedding. An example of such a marriage was the relationship of the Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell with his wife Elizabeth. Though the two people married out of prudence, not love, in the course of time they developed a deep and enduring bond; thus, in one of her letters, Elizabeth writes to her husband, ‘Truly my life is but half a life in your absence’ (Carlyle 1888: 247).

The key quality in a woman was an ability to run the household efficiently. This was frequently the chief consideration for a man in his choice of a wife, especially in poorer families. A ‘helpmate’ was a term that the Puritans liked to use when referring to a good wife. Does this mean, however, that romantic love played no part in marriage? Judging by the large number of seventeenth-century diaries, autobiographies or accidental notes in legal documents, romantic love did play an important role on all social levels. Church court records speak of numerous marriages concluded secretly, without parental knowledge. The above-mentioned sources also contain rich vocabulary describing the feelings and behaviour of young couples—words such as ‘love’, ‘fantasy’, ‘attraction’, ‘flirtation’, etc. For the famous diarist Samuel Pepys, physical attraction was the sole reason for concluding a marriage. Elizabeth, his young wife, came from a poor family of Catholic immigrants, so this match could hardly be called prudent. Yet Elizabeth’s “comeliness” was a constant source of joy to Pepys. Many years after the wedding, upon the occasion of visiting a theatre, he recalls,

But which did please me beyond anything in the whole world was the wind-music [...] which is so sweet that it ravished me, and indeed in a word, did wrap up my sould so that it made me really sick (just as I have formerly been when in love with my wife. (Warrington 1953: III: 180-181)

The position of a woman in the seventeenth-century English marriage was dictated by the patriarchal nature of family relationships, with an emphasis on the subordination of women. Common law was strongly biased in favour of the husband/father. It was still a fact that a married woman had no financial rights independent of her husband. The man also had a right to beat his wife, which was, sadly, a rather common practice.

Closely connected with matrimony is the issue of sexuality. Marriage provided the only space in which the seventeenth-century woman was allowed to express her sexuality, and even this space was not without limitations. Married life was perceived as a parallel of Christ’s bond with his church, so passionate love between husband and wife was regarded as undesirable. Infidelity in marriage was severely punished—the Rump Parliament even imposed death penalty on it (luckily, the law was never strictly adhered to). To quote Cromwell once again, here is an extract from an admonishing letter to his son Richard:

You will think, perhaps, I need not advise you to love your Wife! The Lord teach you how to do it;—or else it will be done ill-favouredly. Though Marriage be no instituted Sacrament, yet where the undefiled bed is, and love, this union aptly resembles that of Christ and His Church. (Carlyle 1888: 146)

It is worth mentioning that adultery in a man was not judged as strictly as it was in a woman. Girls were required to preserve their virginity until the wedding. Afterwards, it was considered a husband's duty to ensure his wife's fidelity by preventing all situations that could awaken her sensuality. The Puritans tried to stop flirtation between the sexes by banning pageants and various kinds of entertainment, especially dance (which they considered immoral).

Although Puritanism had a considerable influence on people's thinking, the gap between theory and reality was quite large. This can be demonstrated by the fact that 25 per cent of seventeenth-century Englishwomen had already been pregnant at the time of the wedding. This was not judged as harshly as we might expect. Being able to have children was a matter of an absolute importance in a woman, so having sex before marriage was the only way to 'confirm' this ability.

The ideal of marital fidelity also contrasted with reality, especially in upper circles of society (Stone 1965: 664). The Restoration of the Stuarts brought a change of moral climate and a release in manners. Practising adultery became a kind of fashion in high society, as is so well-documented by a number of Restoration comedies, such as *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley. We should realise, however, that the libertine lifestyle was mostly a matter of the London elite. In the country, the values of the previous generation remained largely unchanged. It is worth noting that one of the popular topics of Restoration plays was the difference between the hedonistic London society and the 'chaste' country.

As has been suggested before, the main purpose of marriage was having children. It was not only ensuring an heir that was significant; the husband could not act as the head of a family until his marriage had produced an offspring, so it was also a matter of social prestige. For a woman, the whole thing was even more serious. Infertility was perceived not only as a social defect, but as a downright punishment by God. Therefore, women were under enormous pressure to have children ever since their wedding day. An important ritual was the christening of babies—a way of letting the community know that the marriage fulfilled its purpose. The act of giving birth also had a great value, and it took place in much less privacy than today. In aristocratic circles it became a social event, with the woman's friends as onlookers (Bridenthal & Koonz 1977: 194).

Written sources from seventeenth-century England present us with pictures of a wide variety of marriages. Some of these were fairly happy, like those of Samuel Pepys or Oliver Cromwell. Others were not so fortunate. Church records often reveal instances of domestic violence and grave incompatibility between husband and wife. Contrary to our times, however, the possibilities of escape from a failed relationship were very limited. Complete liberation came only when one partner died. For a large number of women, widowhood was actually the only opportunity of achieving social independence.

Traditional church law placed great emphasis on the sacredness of marriage and on its inseparability. Divorce in the modern sense of the word (i.e. termination of a valid marriage with the possibility of remarriage) was not recognised (van Dülmen 1999: 184). A substitute option was declaring the marriage invalid (i.e. stating that the bond had never been a proper marriage); to do this, it had to be proved that the marriage was defective in some way. The most common reasons were the infancy of the couple at the time of the spousals; permanent impotence or frigidity or the discovery that the couple were in fact relatives. Declaring the

marriage invalid gave both partners an opportunity to remarry; however, the wife lost all inheritance rights and the children were proclaimed illegitimate.

Another alternative of escape from an unhappy marriage was a legal separation ‘from bed and table’. This procedure was possible in cases of proven adultery or extreme cruelty. Contrary to the previous option, the separation did not affect the wife’s inheritance rights nor the legal status of the children. However, the disadvantage was that the marriage bond remained undivided and the separated partners could not marry again.

The third option was a procedure called *divortium a vinculo matrimonii*, an act very close to divorce which could only be achieved upon the decision of the Parliament. Needless to say, it was a very protracted and expensive procedure. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, only 200 people attempted it, and only 6 of these were women (Fraser 1981: 335). Proper divorce was legally established as late as 1857.

The seventeenth-century England still saw no targeted effort of women to achieve better social conditions—the first decisive step towards that was made a century later by Mary Wollstonecraft in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Stříbrný 1987: 351). However, it can be said that the position of a married Englishwoman underwent a slow, but steady improvement in the course of the seventeenth century, especially as regards her choice of a life partner. Also, the Puritan emphasis on mutual love in a relationship (in the above-explained sense) can be seen as a positive development.

There are many aspects of married life in seventeenth-century England that deserve further study. The most rewarding and fascinating source of information is always provided by the first-hand accounts of the contemporaries. In connection with the topic of this paper, two sources are especially to be recommended—the above-mentioned family correspondence of Oliver Cromwell and the *Diary* of Samuel Pepys, both available in Czech libraries. The portrait of a woman they paint is both informative and vivid, giving us a valuable insight into the seventeenth-century woman’s reality.

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